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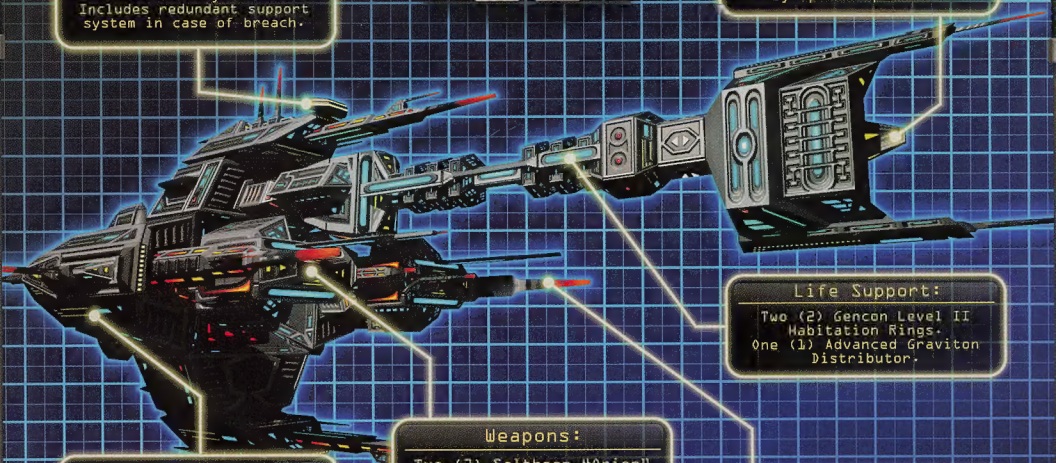

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December 2006 | Issue 192

cover story

42 Random Acts of Randomness

Welcome to Hellgate: London, Flagship Studio's Diablo-esque postapocalyptic London crawler where action/role-playing meets first-person shooter. You can never step in the same world twice. **By Tom Chick**

52 Blingin' in the Holidays

It's the time of the year for all you fly suburban 1337-ists to pimp out your crib with some mad gifts. Here's some iced-out stuff we want, some wack crap for laughs, and the phattest gear people sent us this year. We have no idea what any of this means.

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demo disk

DVD FTW II: Even DVD-ier

We have yet another DVD this month, and it's filled to the brim with demos. First up is the demo for the superb *Company of Heroes*, which clocks in at a bandwidth saturating 2GB. We also have playable demos of *Caesar IV*, the latest *Dawn of War* expansion, *F.E.A.R: Extraction Point*, *Just Cause*, *Left Behind*, *Stronghold Legends*, and a trailer for *Medieval 2*. There's also some wallpapers from the nice chaps at gamewallpapers.com. It's all good.

INSTRUCTIONS: The disc should autoplay once placed in your CD-ROM. If it does not, double-click on CGCD.EXE to launch the interface. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original to: Computer Games, ATTN: CD Replacement, 65 Millet St. Richmond, VT 05477.

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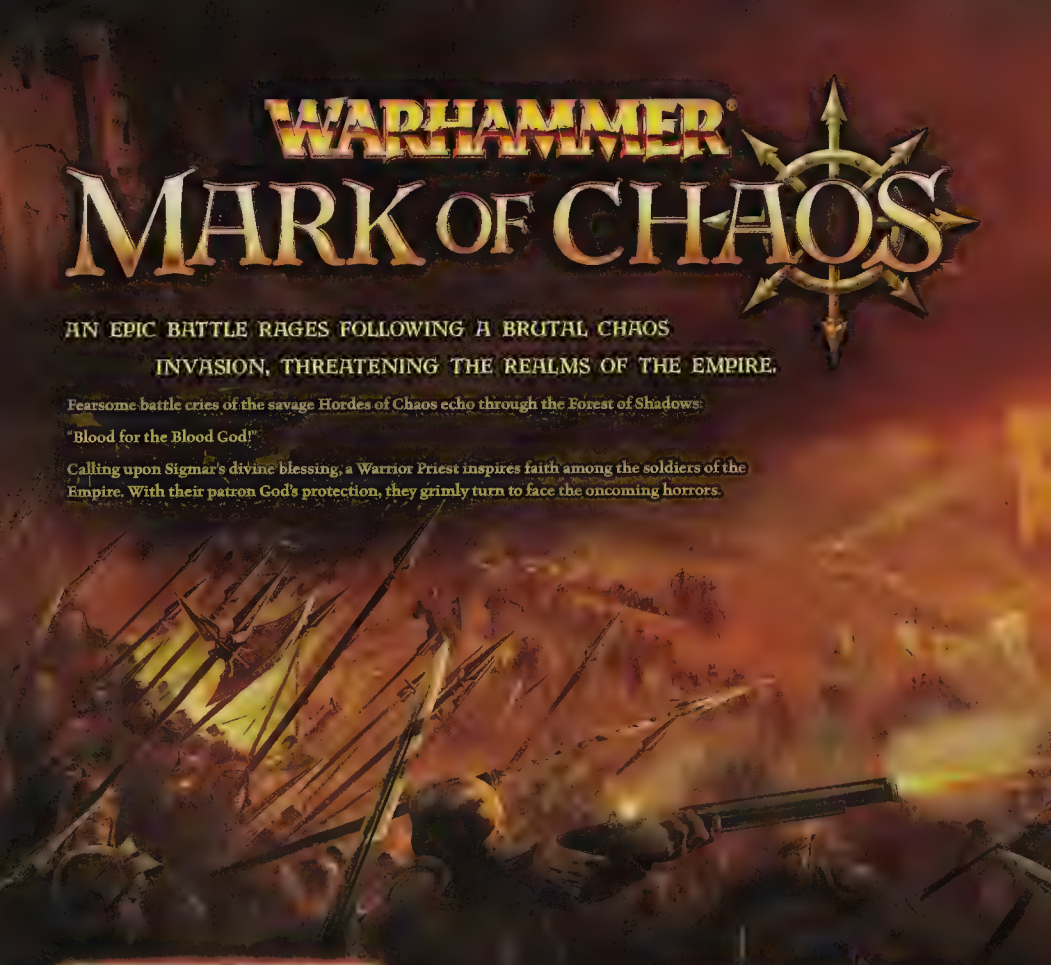

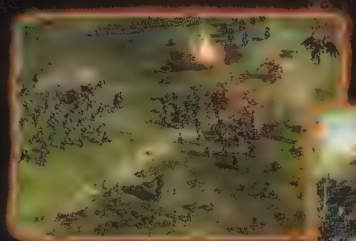

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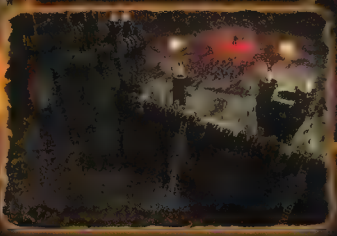

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by Steve Bauman

"Yes, we're harder to reach. But we're worth it, because we're willing to spend money."

Hello, Industry? It's Me, an Adult

I'm over 30, hear me roar, in numbers too big to ignore

According to *Entertainment Weekly*, a recent Billboard Top 10 featured 15 CDs made by artists over 50. The most recent chart topper was by teen idol Bob Dylan. It's fair to say that the people buying his CD aren't the same ones picking up the latest by Panic! At the Disco. Those people probably didn't see Dylan's music videos on MTV or hear his tunes on MySpace. They probably read about his new CD somewhere, saw it promoted at a place like Starbucks, or watched him selling it in an iPod commercial.

The music industry's reaction has been interesting. It's acting shocked—shocked!—that adults still exist and will still buy a music CD. Imagine that.

Adults also buy movie tickets, as the movie industry only appears to recognize in the fall. In addition to seeing blockbusters during the summer, adults are the ones who take in a few "serious dramas" that cost less to produce than Tom Cruise's salary for *Mission Impossible III*. But Hollywood can't help itself. Those big blockbusters make a ton of money—or lose a ton of money, in the case of *Mission Impossible III*—and tend to be targeted at kids, who the movie industry feels have more spending power than taste. Kids aren't seeing these movies for the writing and acting; they want spectacle. Which is cool and all. I like spectacle, too. But I'm not sure I want every movie to be *X-Men III*.

The game industry follows the other entertainment industries' playbooks with as little variation as possible. If you look closely at what's being produced and how it's marketed, it's clear that the industry sees gamers primarily as "men under 25." It's the blockbuster demographic, the ones buying most of the Billboard Top 10. If you're outside that group, you're an afterthought.

There's some logic to this kind of market segmentation, as the kids like to call it nowadays. Reaching everyone only occurs once in a *Sims* moon. Since women are resigned to playing boy games, and men under 25 are easy to reach, the industry focuses its attention on the latter group.

But there's another, extremely large group being ignored by the game industry: the first generation that grew up with *Pong*, *Mario*, and *Civilization*. Most of us are in our 30s or 40s. And, while we can appreciate and enjoy many of the games made for those crazy kids, from time to time we'd like something that matches our lifestyle constraints or is a wee bit more sophisticated. Hollywood does it. The game industry? Not so much.

We all face a weird paradox as we get older. We have more money to spend on games and technology but less time to enjoy them. There's a particularly brutal gap in a person's life—somewhere between getting married and having kids and getting divorced and curling up in the fetal position for 37 hours straight—where your time is at a premium. Games aren't necessarily your highest priority during that time. (Fortunately, you still want to read about games. We think.)

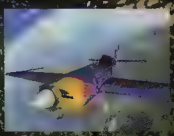
The industry knows this, which is why it's hesitant to make games for us. What it's forgetting is that, after your kids reach a certain age or you reach a certain level of success, some of that game time returns. This is why it's vital for the industry to seriously consider producing games geared more toward adults, and it should be willing to work a little harder to convince us to run down to the store and buy them. (I'll do my part; my design for "Blue Velvet Online" is almost finished.)

Yes, we're harder to reach. But we're worth it, because we're willing to spend money. Look at the success of the retro and casual games on Xbox Live Marketplace. People were excited to play—and pay for—*DOOM*. The original *DOOM*. It's not just kids playing these games; remember, the graphics suck, and the gameplay is primitive compared with that of *Halo 2* and *Dead Rising*. A large percentage of those players are adults reliving some of the moments from college when everyone took their PCs to a room and played co-op *DOOM* over a LAN. Those were the days, my friend. We thought they'd never end.

So it's up to all of us to support with our wallets and our voices the stuff we dig. After yelling at those kids to get off your lawn, yell at the game companies, too. They're only listening to those who scream the loudest, and we're being drowned out. ■

AS REAL AS IT GETS

CONGRATULATIONS. YOU'VE RIGHTED YOUR PLANE. NEXT UP: EMERGENCY LANDING IN THE JUNGLES OF THE CONGO.



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Time for some semiannual Rebound whine. We may have to zap this section, because we receive so few letters. In fact, we get less feedback today than we did 10 years ago, when we had half as many readers, and people who wrote in had to use snail mail instead of e-mail. (We also walked uphill to work in the snow, and we liked it.) We're also running out of Speak Out submissions. So, unless you want to see these sections disappear, write something. Anything. Tell us about your favorite game. Send us pictures of your cat. Write a scathing indictment of MMOs. Bash copy protection. Whatever. Operators are standing by at editor@cgonline.com. And remember, e-mail validates our existence.

Constitutional Nerfing

I'm so glad you keep us up to date on what some of our wonderful tax dollars are being wasted on. I just love hearing how our senators are going to take over our job as a parent or grandparent and tell us what games our children can or cannot play.

Congress needs to stop trying to do a parent's job and get back to the real issues and let the Entertainment Software Rating Board do its job!

We have enough laws; instead of making more, what is so wrong with enforcing the ones we already have?

The Larghes

In Defense of Humanity

Wow! Kelly Wand kicked some serious literary ass with his October "Random Incoherence" column "In Defense of Inhumanity." I've been complaining for years that we humans mistakenly think we're the shiznit of the universe. Kelly could not have more accurately articulated my misanthropic thoughts.

Thanks for yet another well-written, prize-worthy article.

Leslee Beldotti

Kelly Wand responds: It's scary how much better read my readers are than I am.

"Why not just get in your time machine and go back to 1980 and yell out that Vader is Luke's father?"

A One Finger Salute for Three Finger Salute

I enjoy Tom Chick's "Three Finger Salute" column, and his October one was great… except for one little part.

Tom, love you and all, but eff you for ruining the ending of *Prey* for me. I mean, holy crap, the game has been out, what, a month? At least give us six months so that everyone can catch up.

Why not just get in your time machine and go back to 1980 and yell out that Vader is Luke's father, just because you saw the midnight showing?

Robert Burnham

Wait, Luke? Vader? Father? Noooooooo! –ed

There's a book Kelly Wand should read, if he's never heard of it, called *The View From the Center of the Universe*, by Joel R. Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams. It's basically about how important it is for us to create some new type of cosmology or worldview so that we don't end up destroying ourselves as a species.

One of the best options we have to change people's thinking is the fictions we create, and nobody really uses videogames to this end, even though it's like the best of both worlds: technological advancement without the planet-raping ecological downsides.

Anyway, you should check out this book if you feel strongly about it.

Jeremy L.

Language

I strongly disapprove of your inclusion of the word "dick" in your editorial content. (See page 89 of the October issue.) It's simply not appropriate for a magazine that, in the same section, shows how a significant part of its audience is 12-year-olds. Have you carefully thought about "dick" and decided that it's cool? Did you think that perhaps "jerk" would have worked just fine without being offensive to readers. As a reader, I'm offended. As a parent, I think you've got a lot of explaining to do.

Name Withheld

Though we have no intention of peppering every article with bad language, the FTC recently ruled that you can call a person a "dick" on network TV but can't refer to someone's, well, you know… –ed

ERRATA

There were two errors in the review of *American Conquest: Divided Nation* in the October issue. It was developed by Revolution of Strategy, not GSC Gameworld. The review also said it uses the *Cossacks II* engine, but it actually uses the *American Conquest* engine. We regret the errors.

Where you are bruised, there is no map.

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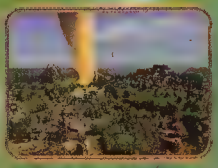

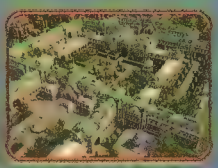

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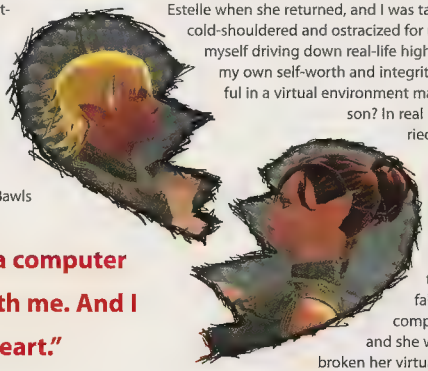
Loving and Losing Estelle

By Edward C. Burton

Four months ago, out of curiosity, I created an account in *Second Life*. I christened myself Edward Laffer, Larry's long-lost cousin, the rustic rube with countrified pizzazz and cornbelt charm. I shopped for clothes, explored, and even rented an apartment.

After a few failed jobs as a male dancer in a nightclub, I submitted stories to *The Second Life Herald* and became a regular on staff at *The Second Life Times*. What better way to get published regularly than to exist and write in a dynamic virtual environment? I got so absorbed that my *World of WarCraft* account fell by the wayside. My *Battlefield 2* clan castigated me repeatedly through *XFire* messages, their harsh criticisms falling on deaf ears and inattentive eyes. The Friday night LAN parties I'd always been a part of carried on without me, my spot taken by some newbie. I drank my Bawls and Mountain Dew by myself.



> **"I had fallen in love with a computer game avatar, and she with me. And I had broken her virtual heart."**

But it was when I met Estelle that my real-life world lost my interest. I became a red-eyed, sleep-deprived zombie because I wanted to be with her in this wondrous environment, this heaven in cyberspace. Estelle was a raven-haired, ghostly-skinned Goth girl with big eyes and a haunting, sad beauty. She was a different persona from her RL self, with whom I've had the pleasure of communicating on occasion and of whom I can say with confidence that our friendship is platonic.

I met her in a vampire club, and it was a classic case of love at first sight. We were a perfect *Second Life* couple, discovering new places together, attending and winning events, and establishing friendships with other avatars. I traded in my apartment for a mansion we shared. She was a master builder, and I became her captive audience, fascinated by this remarkable talent of hers to bend shapes and textures into elegant pieces of wrought-iron furniture and grandiose castles. Simply sitting on a box and talking to her while she worked became my favorite pastime in *Second Life*.

Then Estelle's real life intervened, and she was pulled from *Second Life* into the real world. To my surprise I thought about her constantly, infatuated with a cartoon avatar in an environment that could vanish into nothingness when you pulled a power cord from a socket. The strain became more than I could endure. I logged on in her absence and, out of sheer loneliness, met other avatars and virtually "cheated."

Our *Second Life* friends provided a community of support for Estelle when she returned, and I was tarred and feathered, cold-shouldered and ostracized for my misdeeds. I found myself driving down real-life highways questioning my own self-worth and integrity. Did being unfaithful in a virtual environment make me a bad person? In real life, I've been married for almost two decades with no complications and no circumstances that society would construe as questionable. But the truth is that I had fallen in love with a computer game avatar, and she with me. And I had broken her virtual heart.

Through conscious effort and the healing graces of time, I've been able to work my way back into my friends' lists. I still see places and things in *Second Life* that remind me of Estelle and our time together as avatars in love. But we are congenial with each other now, despite having a history. Our relationship has matured through the strife and broken pieces, and I hope we will always be good friends. My existence in the environment is better than it has ever been. I even make time now to visit Wake Island and tag along with my friends on Molten Core trash runs.

Driving down the highway these days, I still ponder the self-worth and integrity questions, but the answers evade me. More important are the questions themselves, and the idea that a virtual environment could affect me so deeply that such questions were asked in the first place. Perhaps my interest in *Second Life* went deeper than a simple curiosity and was more of a quest of self-discovery. ■

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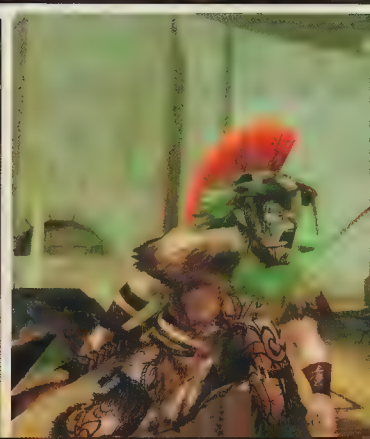


The Gods Must Be Lazy

Gods and Heroes is the MMO where everyone gets an army to do their dirty work. BY ALEX HANDY

DEVELOPER Perpetual Entertainment **PUBLISHER** Sony Online Entertainment **RELEASE DATE** Winter

The ancient Greeks would have been so pissed. All the hard work they put into developing a mythos and creating a pantheon of gods was simply co-opted by the Romans. As Microsoft did to Apple, and Apple did to Xerox, the Romans simply pasted new names on ideas that already existed. And *Gods and Heroes* is, at the end of the day, just taking the *EverQuest* formula and slapping new names on everything.

There are some tweaks that add interesting new wrinkles. The primary distinguishing factor of *Gods and Heroes* is its minion system. Everyone gets pets. In total, every player can gather 12 minions, eight of which can be used at a time. Those pet minions are typically either warrior or caster humans, but there are a lot of rare types that can be found through quests and specialized raids. In all,

> "Some instances are so big that the raiding party will have to establish base camps at various points."

[left] Of course, there is PvP. Here, however, it takes place in the arena, one on one. [below] Standard fantasy creatures abound in Gods and Heroes, though they all feature a Roman twist.

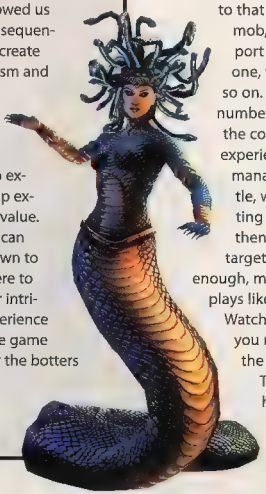
Stieg Hedlund Talks MMOs

What makes an MMO entertaining?
The great thing is that you share a world with other players, interacting with them in different ways—cooperating with them, fighting them, talking with them to find out about things in the world, or just seeing them pass by as you are playing. RPG players have always liked to show off their characters and brag about them to other players, but a colleague of mine from the pen-and-paper days once said, "Don't *tell* me about your character." And that's right: In an MMO, other people see and experience your character in the way people have always wanted to.

What's different about building this persistent world, compared with building Diablo II?
Diablo II was similar in terms of scope, gameplay, items, abilities, and a lot of other things. The real difference [with MMOs] is that you have to more carefully consider things like what happens when two players are competing for resources, such as creatures they are fighting, quest-related NPCs, etc. In *Gods and Heroes*, we wanted to present an experience in which the majority of the world was public and shared by all the players in the server. But for some things, we elected to use instances, as they allowed us to craft more directive or sequential gameplay in order to create more of a feeling of heroism and immersion.

What's the problem with MMOs right now?
I think a lot of them try to extend gameplay but end up exchanging tedium for real value. Most things that a player can "bot" essentially come down to this. People don't find there to be anything rich, deep, or intricate in the gameplay experience and opt out of it. Then the game developers try to go after the botters instead of addressing the real issues, and a downward spiral ensues.

Some instances play out like massive battles from history.



the game holds 12 super-rare minions and dozens of other demi-human types.

The fighting animations are considerably more interactive than they are in other MMOs. Just outside the starting point, you may be jumped by some nasty little green guys who have a tendency to knock you off your feet, jump on your back, and swat you on the head with their clubs. The little guys can interrupt spells and normal attacks when they decide to unleash this particular attack. Of course, that goes both ways, and you may able to interrupt some satyrs with a quick rap on the head, keeping them from returning the favor.

But the actual mechanics of battle aren't exactly new. The combat system is similar to that of other games: Target a mob, toggle attack, then support by occasionally pressing one, two, five, two, three, and so on. And, of course, those number keys are easily bound to the combat skills you gain with experience. You'll also have to manage your army during battle, which basically means setting it to an aggression stance, then telling it to attack your targets. When your army is large enough, much of *Gods and Heroes* plays like *Diablo II's* Necromancer: Watch the minions kill while you run around and collect the loot.

The loot is pretty good here, too. *Gods and Heroes'* lead designer is Stieg Hedlund, the fellow who headed the *Diablo II* design team at Blizzard. Hedlund does love his goodies, and the monsters you'll defeat in *Gods and Heroes* often drop randomly generated loot, such as swords, armor, and magical items. That stuff can't be transferred to your minions, as it could in *Diablo II*. Instead, your troops will be outfitted exclusively with cash. You'll need to pay your metalsmith to build new armor for all of your swordsmen, or spend that extra dough to buy new staves for your casters.

With your army of nine—you're also fighting here, remember—you can venture forth into the wild realms of ancient Rome and its surrounding areas. But this is all old hat. *Gods and Heroes* really comes into its own once you've hit a high level. The game currently tops out at level 40, and the instances built for players at this level are massive and complex. They're certainly larger and more populated than anything yet seen in an MMO. Some are so big, in fact, that the raiding party will have to establish base camps at various points, where they can access their stashes, pets, and weaponsmiths. Some of these instances play out like huge historic battles, where you'll fight alongside Roman warriors storming the shores of Archemides' stronghold, or challenging a city of half-men, half-wolves.

While *Gods and Heroes* isn't exactly one of a kind, it still feels like a fresh take on the MMO genre. For pet lovers, this could be the game you've been waiting for. For fans of *EverQuest* or *World of WarCraft*, however, it remains to be seen whether this is a worthy cause for setting your account aside. ■

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Virtual Basketball Jones

Hit me, Chief, I got the moves in **Freestyle Street Basketball**

DEVELOPER JC Entertainment **PUBLISHER** Vivendi **RELEASE DATE** Spring 2007

The most pickup-friendly team sport seems like a natural fit for the casual bent of *Freestyle Street Basketball*, from Korean developer JC Entertainment (motto: You can't spell "hangtime" without hangul). Quick three-on-three and two-on-two games, plus simple controls, make the no-subscription, online-only game almost like a weekend afternoon at the court, except now everybody is cel-shaded and wearing street clothes. And they level up.

That's right: You pick a base class for your character (center, guard, or forward), modify it by setting your physical characteristics, customize your look, name him/her, and you've got yourself a Level 1 baller. As you gain experience and money, you get to improve a variety of offensive and defensive stats, as well as buy new clothing to boost the stats even more.

The lobby setup makes it pretty easy to jump into a game; it shows a list of teams that still need players, or you can form your own team and, when it fills up, challenge another team. Or you can just hang out and chat. The three-minute games make it easy to have a game and move on or stick with the team and keep playing.

I need someone to set a pick for me at the free-throw line of life.

The feel of play is like a slightly more technical, half-court version of *NBA Jam*. There are no fouls, but players do impede your movement, so you can use tactics like setting picks and boxing out for the best results. All your offense and defense comes down to the arrow keys and four buttons (plus a set of voice macros like "I'm open"), and your abilities do have those stat components to them, so you won't automatically be able to steal, etc. This setup makes for a loose, newbie-friendly game that also provides more challenges the more you play. **–Matthew Gallant**

Shadowrun

DEVELOPER FASA Interactive **PUBLISHER** Microsoft **RELEASE DATE** 2007

It's Like: **Counter-System-Shock**
The Buzz: **The most surprising thing about this adaptation of the pen-and-paper role-playing game is that it isn't an RPG. Instead, it's a *Counter-Strike*–esque FPS that pits megacorp RNA against Lineage, an insurgent force that's been protecting this underground Ziggurat for centuries. Is this really team-based shooter fodder? Its mix of magic and technology pleased the tabletop crowd, so it'll be interesting to see how it fares without dice.**

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The biggest change for the third edition is that it allows you to start at any date you choose between the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the French Revolution (1789).

New World Order

Europa Universalis III won't be living in the past anymore by TROY S. GOODFELLOW

HANDS-ON

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER Paradox Studios **RELEASE DATE** January 2007

The original *Europa Universalis* was Paradox's first international hit. *Europa Universalis II* was so successful that it set the template for almost every Paradox game that followed. Returning to the series after five years, the developer has major changes in mind. A New World is going to be unveiled.

The *Europa Universalis* games place you in command of a nation just as the Middle Ages draw to a close. New seaways need to be explored. New continents are there to be exploited. You have to balance domestic, diplomatic, and religious concerns while you steer your empire through the early modern age. It is a big-picture game, with very simple economic and military models, but little choices can have huge consequences. If you can keep the kingdom stable, the world may be yours.

All that old stuff is back, but it certainly looks new. The world map has received a cartographic facelift that goes beyond the usual addition of new provinces and new nations. You can now recognize terrain without relying on your ability to distinguish various shades of green. As cities expand and improve, they gain a different appearance on the map, so you can head straight for the enemy's largest towns.

The biggest change for the third edition is that it allows you to start at any date you choose between the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the French Revolution (1789). The world situation, technology, and politics of the starting date will be reflected on the map; major European events are already highlighted for your convenience. But if you want to start with the reign of Elizabeth I or Abbas the Great, simply roll back the clock and you'll be there.

That may, in fact, be the only way you get to encounter those great personages. In an effort to make the history more dynamic, the developers have decided that the only his-

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torical monarchs will be those that start the session. You won't know whether your next ruler is a wise administrator or a dunderhead. You may not have an heir at all, leading to all sorts of tough decisions. Historical events are also out, for the most part. The major events like the Reformation and national revolts are given a bit of a boost, but you won't get those textbook summaries of Suleiman's reforms or the Star Chamber anymore. Instead, events will be contingent on national characteristics (religion, tolerance, etc.) and the status of the map. History hasn't vanished. Famous leaders and generals may not be included, but a wide range of other famous figures are at your disposal to improve your nation. Torquemada, Michelangelo, Cao Zhan… each nation can hire only three from a geographically determined list. Grab 'em while you can.

Continuing the theme of "tough choices" is the government system. There are 40 government philosophies to choose from, but you can only choose 10, and these are doled out as your technology improves. It remains to be seen how this will play out in a full campaign (what happens if China goes for conquistadors?). But it should allow for greater national specialization.

The list of additions and changes goes on and on. The elections for the Holy Roman Emperor are more explicit. You can gain prestige by making the pope your puppet. The peace negotiation window is greatly expanded. Though there is still a lot to be done before the early 2007 release, the developers clearly aren't content to rest on the laurels of their prized franchise.

Silent Hunter IV: Wolves of the Pacific

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER Ubisoft **RELEASE DATE** Spring 2007

It's Like: **Even More Silent and Deadly**

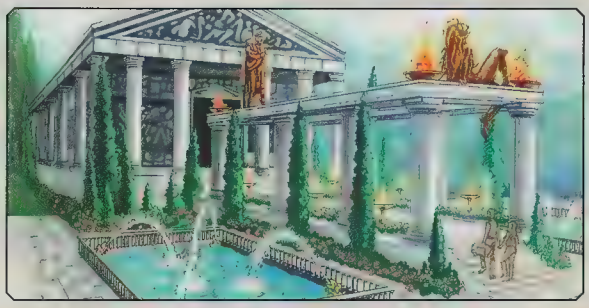
The Buzz: **The expansion to the popular submarine simulator features a Pacific Rim campaign, and the developers promise much better interaction with the commanders and more diverse mission objectives. It will include multiple U.S. fleet boat classes—P-class, Tambor, Salmon, and Gato—each with several development variations. You'll also see the addition of an adversarial (and, hopefully, more stable) multiplayer mode, including escort's commander vs. player wolf pack.**

Erotasy Island

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER FX Interactive **RELEASE DATE** 2007

It's Like: **Care-bear Sociolotron**

The Buzz: **This is more than just an adult virtual chat room. It's a subscription-based MMO that allows subscribers to perform fully explicit sex acts with other willing players. It also offers a "milder" experience in which players can meet and virtual date while remaining fully or partially clothed. There's a scoring and reward system based on socialization, multiple character profiles, and, if you like, complete anonymity—all in high-res 3D. Most importantly, it asks, "Who will you be playing with tonight?" implying that, if you give in to the experience, the answer will most decidedly not be "Yourself."**



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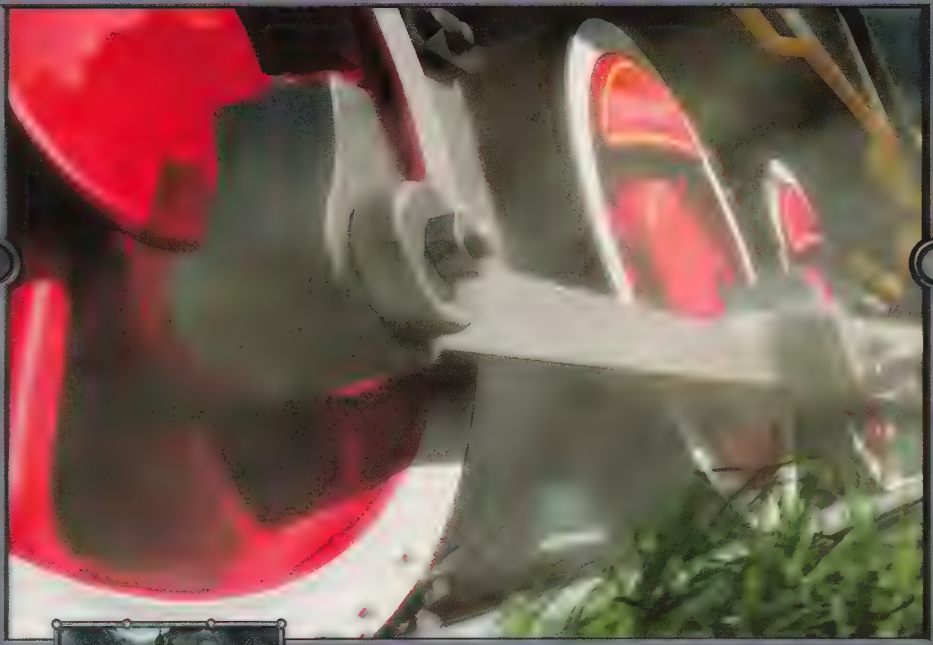

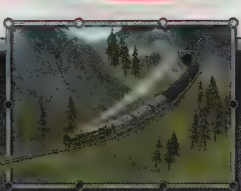

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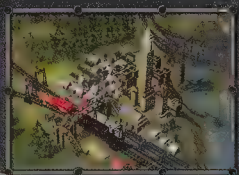

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Poirot's Challenge

Get a clue with **Murder on the Orient Express**

DEVELOPER AWE Games **PUBLISHER** Dreamcatcher **RELEASE DATE** Fall 2006

When you think about divine inspiration for computer game developers, the works of Agatha Christie sit right up there next to SpongeBob cartoons. AWE Games has experience with both of these properties, and as a follow-up to its 2005 title *And Then There Were None* comes another adventure game based on the novel *Murder on the Orient Express*. Considered one of Christie's best works, it will take players for a ride on the classic railroad coaches that feature luxury rooms, elegant conversations, and murder.

You'll take on the role of Antoinette Marceau, a brand new character who is eager to solve mysteries with Christie's seminal detective, Hercule Poirot. David Suchet from the *Poirot* television series provides the voiceover. "We are Poirot fans," says lead programmer Scott Nixon. "It's exciting to have David Suchet voicing the character. I have him on my answering machine now!" They've included much of the original dialogue from the book, along with supporting cinematics.

After an unfortunate incident, Poirot is bedridden and tasks Antoinette with solving the murder mystery while he mentors her through the investigation. Poirot's character also serves as the hint system as certain items and information are found, but you might require more help to discover their real significance. Still, Antoinette is only a few train cars away from help as she delves deeper into the mystery.

You can explore the entire train, and when it's stranded during an avalanche, you'll be able to check out some of the surrounding forest as well. *Orient Express* includes a shortcut system that will allow you to access each car with a quick click, avoiding frequent long, claustrophobic treks back and forth across the train. Although you'll be confined to the Orient Express for most of the 20 hours of gameplay, the classic details of the locomotive and the story twists should keep the momentum going.

[top to bootom] "I'd like to buy a ticket…for murder!" The Orient Express is the older sibling of the Polar Express; Conversations with Poirot are quite…stimulating.

AWE Games has made some significant improvements since its previous Christie title, including better graphics and more content. It's imbued Antoinette with a go-getter attitude that should keep any "I can't do that" moments to a minimum. If AWE gets its wish, Agatha Christie fans should enjoy experiencing one of her best stories, and adventure gamers will get the chance to explore a timeless murder mystery.

–Jonathan Trevisani

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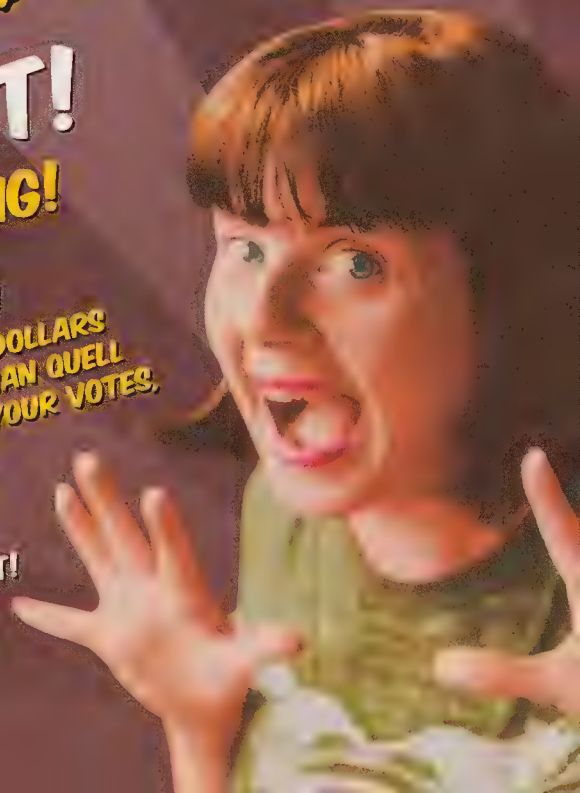
BEWARE! BEWARE, FOR YOU COULD BE NEXT ON THEIR LIST!

BY LARA CRIGGER



Wouldn't it be nice if politicians cared just a bit more about reaching out to their gamer constituency, instead of dismissing it outright? After all, technology has infiltrated politics at every level, and the connectivity, communication, and camaraderie that are prized within the gaming community are the same qualities necessary for a successful campaign bid. Any politician worth his or her salt should be drooling over gamers with Pavlovian delight.

In fact, gamers aren't as ignored as it may seem. Increasing numbers of campaign strategists have realized that, if they can just figure out how to harness the power of the gaming community, they may have the next blogosphere or MeetUp on their hands.

It's the figuring out part, however, that's the problem.

Few politicians have shown any specific interest in courting gamers. After all, the stereotype—supported by pollsters and voter turnout—is that gamers are lazy, apathetic miscreants who'd rather spend time playing *Grand Theft Auto* than voting. But that attitude could eventually backfire. "There's always the risk of alienating potential voters," says Dennis McCauley, editor of industry watchdog blog Game Politics. "Today's lazy, underachieving bum grows up to become tomorrow's Steve Jobs."

Most efforts to use videogames as campaign tools have been token ones. For example, some politicians have posted Flash-based games on their campaign websites. These minimally interactive time wasters, each requiring less than a minute to complete, can be considered games by only the most tenuous of definitions. Most of these feeble attempts have been rightly ignored by gamers.

But at least one politician has attempted something different. On August 31, former Virginia governor Mark Warner—widely rumored to be a potential contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008—became the first politician to officially visit a virtual world, when he gave a brief interview in *Second Life*. Warner stayed just long enough to announce that his PAC, Forward Together, would establish a permanent presence in the *Second Life* community. He also promised to return for a Town Hall meeting in early October.

Considering that Forward Together had officially announced it only the day before, attendance at the interview was surprisingly high. The New Globe Theater required four repeaters (like overflow rooms) to handle the traffic. But gamers' reactions to Warner's appearance varied. "There's some skepticism that this is going to be a one-time thing, that we're only getting in there for the press," says Nancy Scola, part of the Forward Together internet and technology policy team. "But also, a lot of people said that it's great to finally see [a politician] doing something positive with videogames."

"Former Virginia governor Mark Warner became the first politician to officially visit a virtual world, when he gave a brief interview in Second Life on August 31."

In a nonscientific, unofficial poll at New World Notes, the interviewer, Wagner James Au, asked *Second Life* players if they'd be interested in seeing more politicians and campaigns in the world. Forty-three percent replied "yes," while 17% said that it would depend on the politician or campaign. Brett Schenker, also of the Forward Together technology team, isn't surprised. "MMOs—*Second Life* especially—allow people who wouldn't normally be able to meet to go to a MeetUp to find people with like-minded goals and interests, and possibly make some changes," he says. "Maybe if you reach out to them through videogames, that's what will spark their interest."

But can Forward Together galvanize enough voters in *Second Life* to make a difference come November? "You get a couple of people to vote, and that's a couple of people that weren't voting before," says Schenker. "No matter what, that's a positive thing."

Still, no matter how many PACs set up shop in *Second Life*, the game boasts only 600,000-odd members; politically speaking, that's small potatoes. Perhaps what gamers really need is a large organization, armed with money, connections, and name recognition, to lobby for their interests and give politicians no choice but to listen.

Enter the ESA. The Entertainment Software Association's Video Game Voters Network (VGVN) is a grassroots political effort designed to pressure politicians to end game censorship legislation. On its website, videogamevoters.org, the VGVN claims that it's "a place for American gamers to

FLASH IN THE PAN

Polling the candidates' worst campaign Flash games

Thank You, Debbie

This primitive offering comes from Mike Bouchard, the Republican challenger in the Michigan U.S. Senate race. Featuring a mock-up of incumbent Debbie Stabenow's campaign offices, it allows players to click on hanging portraits to summon cartoon voters. As the freakish caricatures give sarcastic, biting testimonials in favor of Stabenow's record, Stabenow plays whack-a-mole with the offenders. Rating: Zero stars. At least let us do the whack-a-mole-ing, Bouchard!

Where's Bob Casey?

Rick Santorum, the Republican U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, has posted this series of games in an attempt to portray his opponent, Bob Casey, as someone who spends more time on the campaign trail than in his offices. The first installment features a skydiving Howard Dean; the second, a Wild West theme; and the third, a crime detective storyline where you again encounter Dean who, oddly enough, has a southern accent. Rating: ★★½ Interesting narrative with limited interactivity.

Carrera Por La Presidencia

In his successful bid for the Mexican presidency, Felipe Calderón included many videogames on his website, the largest being this *Mario Bros.* clone. It stars Calderón as a swashbuckling superhero zapping his party opponents, who were portrayed as lumbering dinosaurs. Rating: ★★★★★ Slaying political opponents in Jurassic-style combat? Now *that's* politicking.

organize and defend against threats to video games." It even features an impassioned plea from Will Wright, begging gamers to join the VGVN's cause. (No one from VGVN responded to multiple interview requests.)

The network's main tactic is to get gamers across the country involved in a massive letter-writing campaign to their national representatives. To make things easier, the VGVN's website hosts an automatic form letter, which you can e-mail to both of your U.S. senators with a click of a button. Visitors to the site can also register to vote, see current videogame bills in debate, and read "success stories" about videogame legislation that was defeated in state courts.

> **"Appeals to Congress for support are, at best, misdirected."**

It sounds too good to be true. That's because it is. The VGVN has demonstrated no causal link between the e-mail campaign and the success stories printed on its website. In fact, many of the congressional recipients have responded to the form letters in kind, with more form letters. "A battle of form letters," says McCauley. "What could be more exciting than that?"

The main design flaw in the VGVN effort is that it targets members of the U.S. Congress, particularly senators. From a publicity standpoint, this makes sense. Senators like Hillary Clinton, Evan Bayh, and Joe Lieberman have often crusaded for tight government regulation of videogames. However, with the exception of the recently introduced Family Entertainment Protection Act, all the anti-gaming legislation—and court battles—have occurred at the state level. Appeals to Congress for support are, at best, misdirected.

The VGVN is run by the ESA, which is a trade group for game publishers. Developers and gamers themselves have no explicit say in the movement. "The VGVN, under its current management, will always be beholden to the game publisher," says McCauley. The interests of publishers, he adds, aren't always in concert with those of gamers, or even those of developers. That could spell politically sanctioned monopolies, price fixing, even price gouging for gamers.

Although gamers certainly want their representatives to listen and understand their opinions, there's also the question of whether any self-respecting citizen would vote for a politician based strictly on his or her views about videogame legislation. That might be taking the issue a little too far. "I love my games, but there are larger issues to consider," adds McCauley. "Besides, game bills will always lose in the courts."

Will gamers ever become an important factor in campaigns? It's hard to say. Then again, two years ago, no one expected blogs to achieve national significance. Nor did anyone expect movies from the Nedheads group on YouTube to play a measurable role in Ned Lamont's recent triumph over Joe Lieberman in the Connecticut Democratic primaries.

What will matter most is how the gaming community continues to grow in coming years. "Who knows how far the community of gamers can expand?" asks McCauley. As an example, he points to *World of WarCraft*. "Seven million users. Who would have believed that two years ago?" ■

QUOTABLES

"From the moment I'm introduced to Ensemble Studios' Bruce Shelley, I can tell my bumbling 'Is that piñata gay?' style of gaming journalism just isn't going to fly."

–Florian Eckhardt of Kotaku.com from a feature on *Age of Empires III: The Warchiefs*. He later says, "If you like RTSes, which I don't, [*The Warchiefs*] looks totally great."

Heroes of Azeroth Unite!

Arcanite Reaper
Are We There, Yeti?
Quest
Pay 6 to complete this quest
Reward Put three Mechanical Yeti ally tokens with 1 ATK and 1 health into play
Leeroy Jenkins
Paladin
Leeroy has ferocity

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NEWSBYTES

More Attacking Politicians—Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS) has proposed a "Truth in Video Game Rating Act" that would require the ESRB to play through a game in order to determine its rating. (Currently, publishers submit scenes to the ESRB.) It would also add government oversight, which pretty much eliminates the reason for the ESRB's existence....

Because Physics Are Fun—Artificial Studios announced that *CellFactor: Revolution* will appear in December. Initially created as a technology demo for the AGEIA PhysX processor, it has lots of things that blow up and physics-based simulated liquid and cloth. Who doesn't love that simulated cloth?...

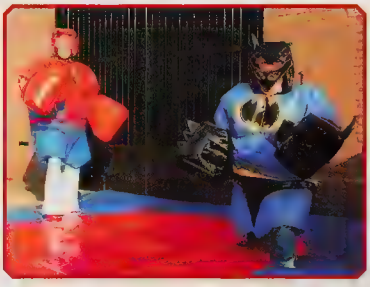
iGames for iPod—Finally, something useful to do with your iPod. Apple will add more gaming capabilities to its fifth-generation iPods. Casual games include *Pac-Man*, *Zuma*, *Texas Hold 'em*, and *Tetris*. The games will be available from the iTunes store for $4.99 each....

Marketing Speak 101—DICE and Electronic Arts plan in-game advertising for *Battlefield 2142*. The reason? "Through the agreement, fans of the franchise will see new, realistic brand presence integrated into contextually relevant game environments," says DICE. We're using that as our new pickup line....

HP's Voodoo—In a move surely made in response to Dell's acquisition of Alienware, HP went on a shopping spree of its own and netted VoodooPC. HP will form a new unit within its Personal Systems Group to focus on gaming systems....

Larval Marvel

Microsoft chooses a new developer for its upcoming Superhero MMO



It looks as if Microsoft was simply in a pre-molting phase when it first killed off its in-house MMO *Mythica*, then relinquished publishing rights to Sigil Games' *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* to Sony Online, leaving its MMO nest virtually empty. A little over a year ago, it was reported that Sigil would develop another MMO for Microsoft, based on Marvel Entertainment's archetypal universe of superheroes. Instead, Cryptic Studios appeared out of (not exactly) nowhere and entered the picture. Right as the developer was in the completion stages of *City of Villains and City of Heroes–Issue 8: To Protect and Serve* (a title even more distinguished because it has a dash and a colon), Microsoft and Marvel hooked up with the now well-seasoned developer to work on *Marvel Universe Online* for Windows Vista and Xbox 360.

Not exactly a stranger to tights, masks, and capes, Cryptic is planning to play some very creative shuffleboard in order to take on this project. "This team is, and will remain, completely separate from other teams working on other games at Cryptic," said lead designer Matt Miller. "We at Cryptic and NCsoft have great plans for the future and want to keep making the *City of* games exciting and fresh." A statement from *City of* publisher NCsoft states that it "has no response regarding the business dealings of an independent company such as Cryptic Studios." NCsoft didn't even break a sweat—it learned a long time ago that Mennen Speed Stick is a great friend to spandex.
–Cindy Yans

Gamers: The Movie

If even the tiniest corner of your brain harbors just one smidgen of empathy for geekdom, you will love this silly, overblown send-up of tabletop gaming. Filmed in the style of Christopher Guest's mockumentaries like *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show*, and *This is Spinal Tap*, *Gamers* tells the story of a group of high school friends who technically came of age a long time ago. But, instead of becoming normal members of the human race, they spent the last 23 years playing *Demons, Nymphs and Dragons* (*DND*, get it?). Having put over 70,000 hours into the game, they're hell-bent on breaking the "longest game ever" record currently held by a group of Iowa corn farmers.

Sophomoric to the nth degree, the film unfolds in a series of vignettes that expose the inner psyches of these hyperbolically pathetic losers. Unless you're truly unforgiving, there are moments in this film that'll make you laugh until you cry. It tries a little too hard from time to time, but you still owe it to yourself to take a look at this aggressive tribute to *Eraserhead*, horse semen, and dice. **–Cindy Yans**

The movie is available at buygamers.com.

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CH PRODUCTS

Fear and Loathing in San Diego

By Sparky

We were somewhere around the Gaslamp District, right across from the convention center, when the feeling began to take hold.

I remember saying something like, *man, I'm so old I thought that chick dressed as Silent Hill's "Pyramid Head" was supposed to be a tank from Spectre...*

Suddenly, there was a terrible roar all around us, and the street was full of guys in Batman costumes, all BIFFing and POWing and BAMing around us, and a voice was screaming

WE CAN'T STOP HERE, THIS IS BAT COUNTRY!

WELCOME TO COMIC-CON!

So there I was, at the San Diego Comic-Con, completely twisted on Diet Coke, no cash, no story for this magazine, and on top of everything else, two guys in MORTAL KOMBAT costumes to deal with.

How would TOM CHICK handle this situation?

We had two bags of swag: a bunch of Warhammer Online posters, three silver superhero capes, some Alien Hominid buttons, a Sam & Max t-shirt, a whole horde of World Of Warcraft trial DVD-ROMS, a foam Hellboy Hand of Doom and a couple of blue plastic spoons labeled "THE TICK".

Also some really bad manga and a bag of Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies.

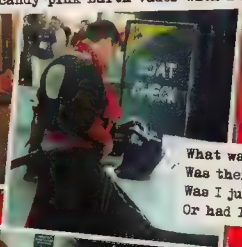
Not that we NEEDED all that, but once you get out on the show floor, the tendency is to push it as far as you can.

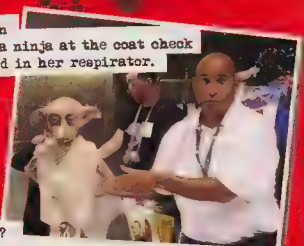
The only thing that really worried me was the Milanos. There is nothing in the world more helpless and irresponsible and depraved than a geek in the depths of a Milano binge, and I knew we'd get into that chocolatey stuff pretty soon.

In some circles, SDCC is a far far better thing than E3, GenCon, and a day at Knott's Berry Farm all rolled into one.

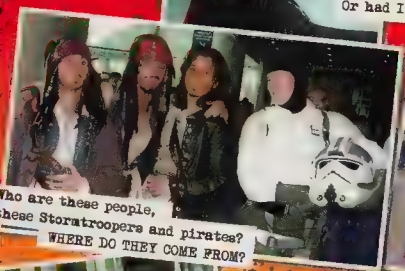
I hate to say this, but this place is getting to me. I think I'm getting THE FEAR.

PSYCHEDELICS are almost irrelevant at a convention where you can wander around any time and witness a ninja at the coat check or a candy-pink Darth Vader with a Marlboro jammed in her respirator.

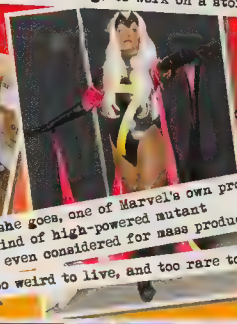




What was I doing here?
Was there really any computer gaming news to be found here?
Was I just roaming around in a pop culture frenzy of some kind?
Or had I really come here to San Diego to work on a story?

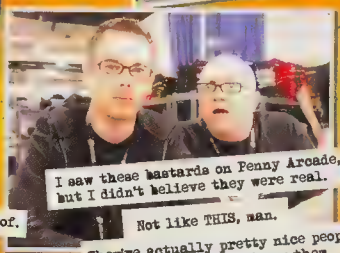


Who are these people, these Stormtroopers and pirates?
WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?



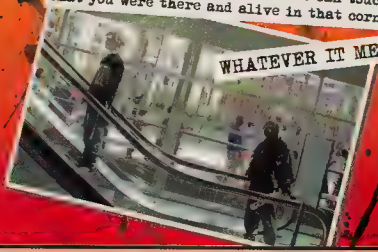
There she goes, one of Marvel's own prototypes. Some kind of high-powered mutant never even considered for mass production.
Too weird to live, and too rare to die.

SDCC '06 was a very special time and place to be a part of.
Maybe it meant something.
Maybe not, in the long run.
I didn't find much in the way of gaming news, anyway.

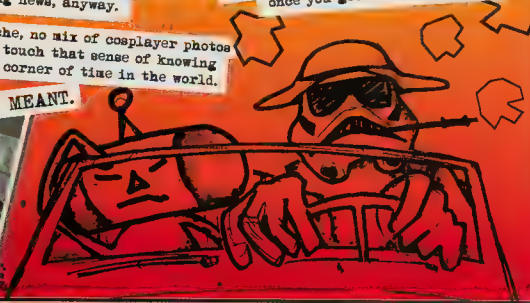


I saw these bastards on Penny Arcade, but I didn't believe they were real.
Not like THIS, man.
They're actually pretty nice people once you get to know them.

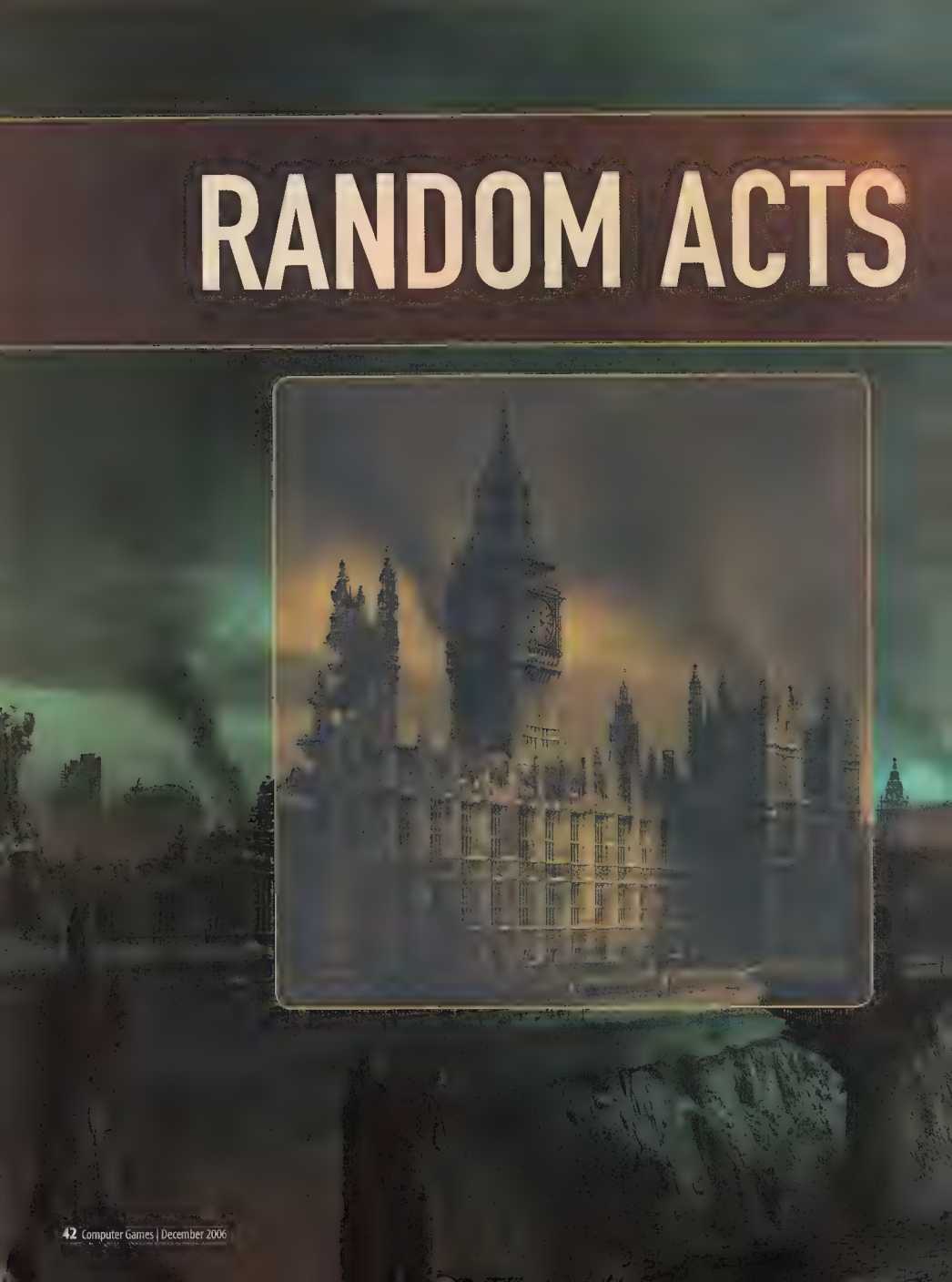
But no goofy Hunter S. Thompson pastiche, no mix of cosplayer photos or leftover "V for Vendetta" masks can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time in the world.



WHATEVER IT MEANT.



RANDOM ACTS



OF RANDOMNESS

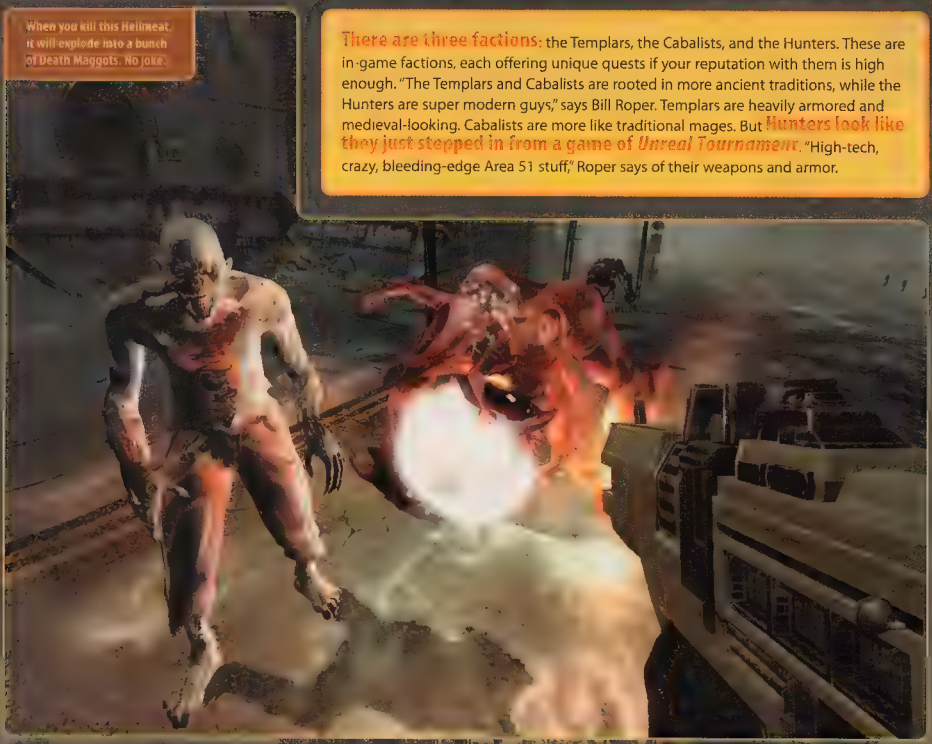
Welcome to HELLGATE: LONDON. Flagship Studio's Diablo-esque postapocalyptic London crawler where action/role-playing meets first-person shooting. You'll never step in the same world twice.

By Tom Chick

"Randomization allows players to build their own stories. Everyone has a massively common shared experience, but their paths to get there are completely different. So for us, *Hellgate: London* is **all about randomization**. The last time you went through this area, it was maintenance rooms. Now, it's back alleys or parks."

—Bill Roper, Flagship Studios

Hellgate: London is about **demons invading London**. Think of Tube stations as your town hubs. On the overmap, they show up as hexes. Areas between Tube stations are represented by circles. **These are randomly generated instances**, built from nearly 50 "tile sets" and stocked with randomly determined monsters. There are also squares, which indicate special missions. These are constructed from hand-built areas—usually landmarks such as Covent Garden, St. Paul's Cathedral, or the British Museum—set in randomly generated environs. You'll also find "Hellrifts" to the **alternate dimension** from which demons are invading.



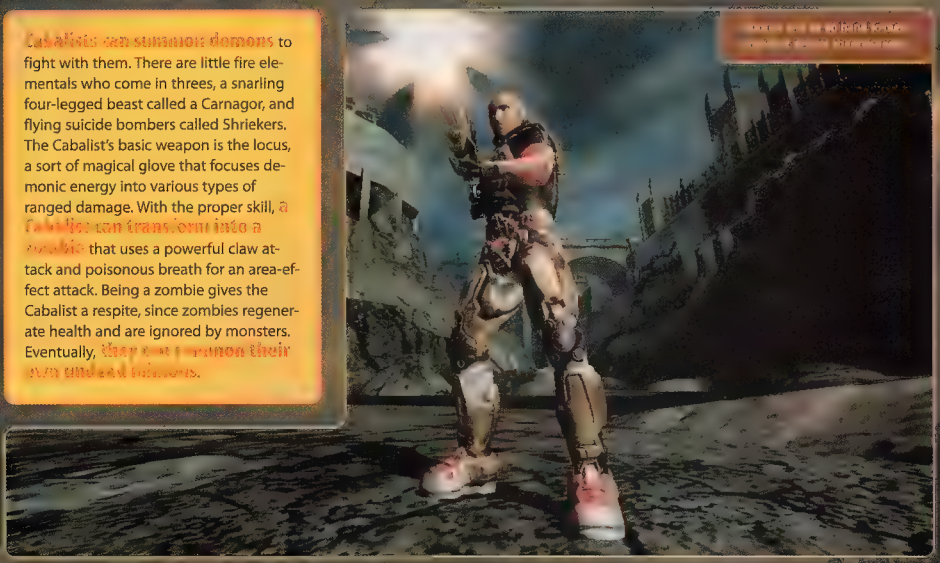
When you kill this Hellmeat, it will explode into a bunch of Death Maggots. No joke.

There are three factions: the Templars, the Cabalists, and the Hunters. These are in-game factions, each offering unique quests if your reputation with them is high enough. "The Templars and Cabalists are rooted in more ancient traditions, while the Hunters are super modern guys," says Bill Roper. Templars are heavily armored and medieval-looking. Cabalists are more like traditional mages. But **Hunters look like they just stepped in from a game of *Unreal Tournament*.** "High-tech, crazy, bleeding-edge Area 51 stuff," Roper says of their weapons and armor.

The factions in *Hellgate* are the foundation of the game's **class system.** You choose a faction when you create your character. As you level up, you select skills from a faction-specific skill tree. Then, somewhere around level 10, you'll select one of the three unique classes for your faction. **The skills aren't finalized yet,** but in an early build of the game, Hunters selected among classes with skill trees titled Recon (which includes bomb planting tricks, similar to traps in *Diablo II*, and various levels of stealth), Engineering (which lets you turn unused weapons into turrets, or "item pets"), and Marksman (which gives you special attacks like multishot and ricochet).

The **Hunter faction** is what Bill Roper calls **"our FPS class."** Cabalists and Templars are designed to be played with an autolock targeting system. This makes it easy to attack while you concentrate on dodging incoming attacks. But Hunters have a traditional aiming reticle that determines where their attacks go, exactly as in a **first-person shooter.** It's a completely different type of gameplay with its own unique challenges.

Cabalists can summon demons to fight with them. There are little fire elementals who come in threes, a snarling four-legged beast called a Carnagor, and flying suicide bombers called Shriekers. The Cabalist's basic weapon is the locus, a sort of magical glove that focuses demonic energy into various types of ranged damage. With the proper skill, a Cabalist can transform into a zombie that uses a powerful claw attack and poisonous breath for an area-effect attack. Being a zombie gives the Cabalist a respite, since zombies regenerate health and are ignored by monsters. Eventually, they can summon their own undead minions.



The Templars are *Hellgate's* melee fighters, although they can use some ranged weapons, such as Spike Bolter shotguns. Templars have auras around them, indicated by a faint line. Many of their skills are powered by the number of enemies within the aura's radius. For instance, one skill boosts damage with a fire bonus, another increases the rate at which health regenerates, and another automatically destroys a percentage of incoming missile attacks. Only Templars can use shields, which can bash nearby enemies, knocking them away. For the opposite effect, Templars can use an offhand weapon called a grappler that pulls distant enemies into melee range.

"In a game like this, when you're equipping your character, you have a tough choice between function and fashion," says Bill Roper. "If you pick the best items, you might end up with a gold breastplate, white pants, a red helmet, and green boots. You look like a reject from clown college. So we're letting players apply one item's theme to all their armor." How this works right now is that the most prominent piece of armor applies its theme to all the other bits. Say you've got a black breastplate with spikes and silver trim. When you equip it, it applies the "black with spikes and silver trim" theme to everything you're wearing. Flagship is toying with the idea of letting players select which item's theme to apply, or even letting them turn off the theme scheme entirely—in case a player actually wants to look like a clown from clown college.

Armor is shared among all the factions, so you don't need to worry about finding, for instance, a pair of awesome boots that you can't use. However, each of the base weapon types (Bill Roper says there are "about 100") is only usable by a particular faction. Templars use swords, Hunters use high-tech military weaponry, and Cabalists get the funky guns. For instance, there are the HARPs, or Harmonance Resonance Projectors, that lock enemies into place; the Jade Hydra that spits out seven beams of toxic damage to attack multiple enemies; Scarab Launchers that fire swarms of hungry beetles; Locust Hives that fire swarms of locusts; and an Electric Eel Launcher that **launches a flopping electric eel**.

Weapons can be customized using *Hellgate*'s mod system. Mods are similar to gems in *Diablo*; attach them to a weapon, and they'll add an effect or somehow improve it. But, unlike gems, mods can be freely swapped in and out. All mods will change the weapon's in-game model, so a tricked-out gun will look considerably different from its default model. There are five types of mods: fuel, ammunition, batteries, rockets, and relics. **Only certain weapons can accept certain mods.** For instance, an ammunition or rocket mod won't fit into a sword. (Note that ammunition and batteries are just types of mods, and not actual ammunition. None of the weapons in *Hellgate* have limited charges or ammo. "We don't want that moment where suddenly your weapon is useless because your ammo ran out," says Bill Roper. **"We don't like that."**)

Each of the five types of damage has a **possible secondary effect.** Physical damage has knockdown, toxic damage has poison (it does damage over time and prevents healing), electrical damage has stun, fire damage can ignite you, and spectral damage can cause phasing (i.e., the victim causes half damage and takes double damage). **Every attack is color-coded** by the type of damage it inflicts, so it's always clear what you're firing and what's being fired at you. Furthermore, in your inventory, a weapon's damage type is indicated by an icon behind the numerical rating for how much damage it does. The icon might also be accompanied by **a splat symbol with a range to show splash damage.**

In addition to health, **characters may have an armor and shield rating**, depending on which equipment or items they're using. Armor and shield are clearly displayed with your health bar in the upper left corner of the screen. Armor reduces the chance that a given attack will hit you, whereas shielding absorbs damage from successful attacks. The shield bar is reduced as it absorbs damage, but it will slowly regenerate over time. **Different types of attacks have different levels of effectiveness** against armor or shields.

The attributes aren't finalized yet, but as it stands right now, each character has Accuracy, Concentration, Stamina, and Willpower. In addition to the usual functions (Stamina determines your health, for example), **attributes will determine how many and which items you can equip**. Items have an attribute cost, and the total cost of equipped items can't exceed that attribute. For instance, suppose your Stamina is 20. When you equip boots that take 4 Stamina and a breastplate that takes 10, a bar fills up underneath your Stamina attribute showing that you've accounted for 14 out of your 20 points. So, if you have a helmet that takes 7 Stamina, you can't wear it. "**It's almost like a food cap in a real-time strategy game**," says Bill Roper. And it further serves to distinguish among attributes and classes. Hunters' weapons use accuracy, Templars' weapons use concentration, and Cabalists' weapons use willpower. Higher-end items use multiple stats. **Some mods and skills modify attribute costs.**

EXCLUSIVE BOX OF INFO

- The third faction, unannounced until now, is the Hunters, who are super-modern soldiers with high-tech military equipment.
- Whereas the other classes automatically lock onto targets, letting you just click to attack, Hunters play just like a first-person shooter.
- Each of the three factions will have three classes, for a total of nine.
- With a skill tree for each basic faction, as well as one for each class, *Hellgate: London* boasts twelve unique skill trees.

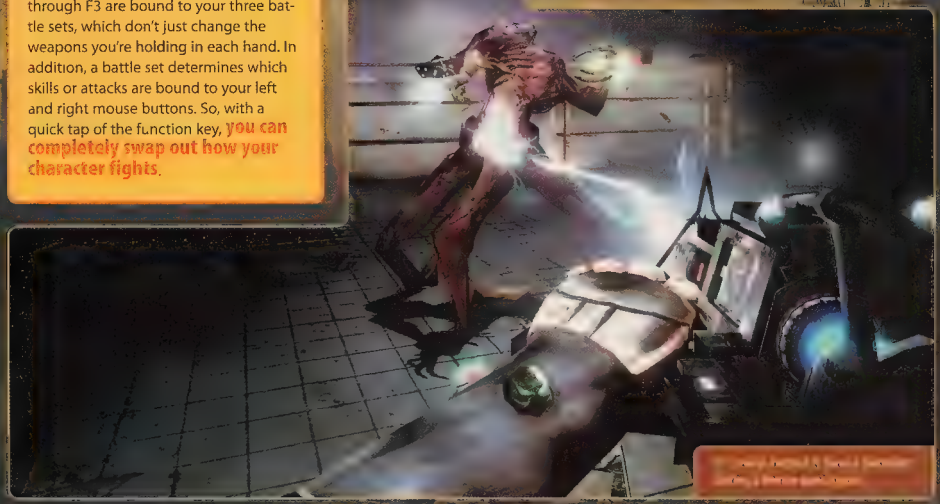
TEN THINGS SAID BY BILL ROPER AS HE PLAYED HELLGATE: LONDON

0. "This is where I would prefer to have **another weapon**."
9. "The designers of the London Underground were **Freemasons**. There was always one of them present at the mixing of the cement to lay the foundations. What if they were putting in special alchemical substances that would make the Underground a sort of **demon fallout shelter**?"
8. "Ha, I'll **drain you** faster than you'll **drain me**!"
7. "Man, we really need a '**remove all mods**' button."
6. "Go, my **demon minions**!"
5. "We could easily do a **Hellgate: Tokyo** or **Hellgate: Cairo** by taking heroic and demonic archetypes from those parts of the world."
4. "Let me see if I can **take advantage** of the fact that their pathing is bad in this build."
3. "That's the cricket bat. We'd all just seen **Shaun of the Dead**."
2. "We're doing a lot of **under-type garments** in this game."
1. "**Ah, leveling**."

In certain situations, a skill icon will appear in the lower left corner next to the label "Shift" or "Control." These are **context-specific reminders** that *Hellgate* uses to make an educated guess that you may want to use a particular skill. For instance, if you're just walking, Shift shows over the Sprint icon. Press the Shift key and you'll sprint. If you've got three or more enemies in front of you and you're a Templar with the Sweep skill, Shift shows over the Sweep icon. Press it and you'll perform a 360-degree attack against all adjacent enemies. Antidotes, fire extinguishers, and health injectors work the same way, but with the Control key. If you're poisoned, burning, or low on health, it will be temporarily bound to the appropriate item, and an icon will inform you that you can use it. "If we see you're walking backwards," Bill Roper says, "the Control key brings up the shield booster," which temporarily adds a bunch of points to your shield rating. "We figure there's probably some reason you're [walking backwards]. **People back up when they're getting hammered**."

There are **three hollow icons** in the lower left corner of the screen. Each indicates an objective of some sort. For instance, a flame means you should kill an enemy with fire damage. A sun means you should kill an enemy with spectral damage. A pair of fangs means you should kill a "beast"-type enemy. A pentagram means you should kill a "primus demon." **Fulfill an objective and icon goes solid.** When you fulfill all three, you get a temporary bonus, or maybe a stash of items appears. Then three more icons randomly appear in their place. "**It's like trying to hit a jackpot**," Bill Roper says. "I guess the only thing we don't like about it is that it's too random."

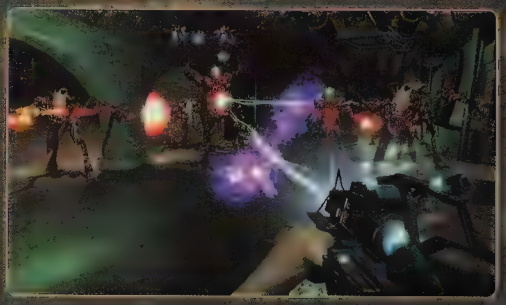
Let's say your favorite weapon does fire damage. But just around the corner, there might be a whole mess of demons who shrug off fire damage. In a game like *Hellgate*, you're going to want to be able to **adapt quickly to different situations**. That's where battle sets come in. Many action/RPGs let you swap between two weapon sets, usually one ranged and one hand-to-hand, but *Hellgate* gives you three sets of weapons. F1 through F3 are bound to your three battle sets, which don't just change the weapons you're holding in each hand. In addition, a battle set determines which skills or attacks are bound to your left and right mouse buttons. So, with a quick tap of the function key, **you can completely swap out how your character fights**.



As creatures drop **loot**, its name appears onscreen, much like when you hold down the Alt key in *Diablo*. When you're close enough to loot, a press of the "F" key will pull it to you. "**You're kind of, like, vacuuming it up**," Bill Roper says, demonstrating how he can suck loot toward his character. And just as in *Diablo*, all this loot has to fit into your inventory grid. The grid is currently pretty small, so you will require frequent use of one-shot Personal Relocation Devices, *Hellgate*'s version of a town portal scroll. However, there's a slot on the paper-doll figure for a backpack, which Roper says might be used to increase inventory space. **This will cut down on trips** back to the nearest Tube station to sell off your extra stuff for Palladium, the game's currency.

Single-player and multiplayer games will be entirely separate, with **online characters stored on secure servers**. Bill Roper says there will be an **auction house** for characters to buy and sell items among themselves. Among the game types that can be set up, Roper mentions a "hardcore" option, which will presumably mean killed characters are permanently killed. There will also be some limited form of player-vs. player combat. "**We know players want to test themselves against each other**," Roper says. "'What can I do to see how my character stats and equipment stack up against others'?' So we'll start with some sort of arena combat."

"We want to mix ***Diablo II* with *Half-Life***," Bill Roper says as he dashes through ruined English streets, strafing past a group of about forty snarling zombies backed by a half dozen shambling Hellmeats. Considering the number of enemies onscreen, the fast-paced combat, and the fact that he's been at this for five hours with no sign of letting up, Flagship may very well do just that: **mix an insidious game** that consists of equal parts compulsive leveling/loot-gathering and visuals worthy of the latest shooters. Make sure you've got a comfortable chair; you're probably going to **be here for a while**. ■



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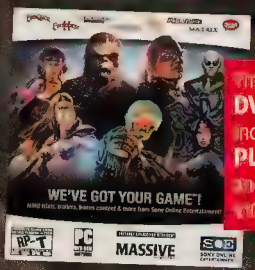

The newsstand edition includes a **FREE DVD** with **FIVE** playable trial versions, including **EVERQUEST II**, **EVERQUEST**, **PLANETSIDE**, **STAR WARS GALAXIES**, and **THE MATRIX ONLINE**, plus a free VIP code to the beta of **GODS & HEROES**.

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BLINGIN' IN THE HOLIDAYS

It's that time of the year for all you fly suburban 1337-ists to pimp out your crib with some mad giftz. Here's some iced-out stuff we want, some whack crap for laughs, and the phattest gear people sent us this year. We have no idea what any of this means.

CONTRIBUTORS: Steve Bauman, Kevin Rice, Peter Suciu

COUCH POTATOES RISE!

Or, in the case of these fine products, sit right back down

Panasonic TH-103PZ600U Plasma TV ($69,999)

Since everyone reading this magazine is fabulously wealthy (you haven't been lying on those surveys, have you?), this 103-inch plasma TV is the ultimate gift for your kids, for your spouse, or for you to fill that spot on the wall (and possibly in your heart). It's a nice alternative to buying that new Porsche. With its 1080p resolution, movies and games will look so good you won't want to leave your house again. And it comes in at under $70K, which was the cutoff for this gift guide. Because you're all rich and all. (panasonic.com)

InFocus IN76 Projector ($2,999)

If you really want to feel like a movie mogul, this projector will unleash your inner Spielberg. OK, it won't help with your skills as a director, or even raise funds for your dream project. But it will turn any wall in your house or apartment into a 100-inch movie screen. And with that alone, you might just feel like Cecil B. DeMille. The output quality of this HD projector is stunning. Who needs a TV? (infocus.com)

Logitech Harmony For Xbox360 ($129)

As that Henry David Thoreau cat once said, simplify. Since he was a big home-electronics fan, he knew what it was like to try to juggle five or more different remote controls: TV, cable box, DVD ···▸

player, receiver, media PC, and console. The Harmony is a perfect solution to that particular problem, as it lets you download profiles for all of your components on your PC and then dump them to the remote via USB. Never switch remotes again. (logitech.com)

Sony Remote Commander RM-AX4000 ($149)
Nothing says "master of my domain" quite like a giant illuminated touch-screen remote. Sony's behemoth will easily learn the functions of any remote control you throw at it; just point your old remote at it and press the button you want it to learn. Yes, it's overkill, but geek-chic knows no price. (sonystyle.com)

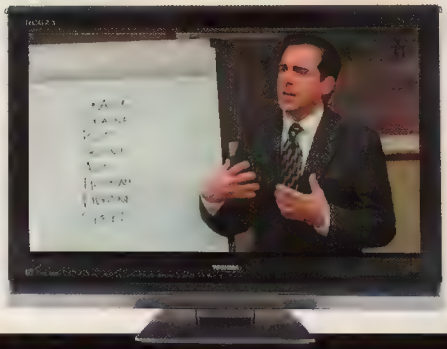
Samsung BD-P1000 Blu-Ray Player ($999)
Blu-Ray offers 1080p resolution for true high-definition picture and sound. This player even makes your existing DVD library look better, as it upscales existing DVD discs, meaning you don't have to replace your entire movie library. Yet. (samsung.com)

Pelican System Selector Pro ($79)
Maybe you just got a new HDTV, but it has only one component input. Or maybe you have four consoles, a DVD player, and a satellite receiver all fighting for the limited inputs available. Whatever the problem, this unit has six AV inputs and two Ethernet ports. Its sleek styling will also fit nicely into any home stereo setup. (pelicanacc.com)

Toshiba HD-XA1 HD-DVD Player ($799)
HD-DVD has less support from the major studios than Blu-Ray, but early adopters can make the jump with this deluxe player that satisfies even serious movie moguls with 1080p outputs and upscaling for standard DVDs. (toshiba.com)

Westinghouse LVM-47W1 ($2,499)
If you want to take the leap to 1080p HDTV, you can't do it for less than this. It has six inputs, but its most attractive feature is that price. (westinghouse.com)

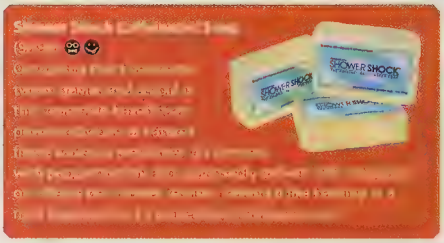
Toshiba 47LX196 LCD TV ($4,300)
This 47-inch widescreen, three-inch-thick LCD set delivers the 1080p goods and does so at a price that mortals can almost afford. (toshiba.com)



WIDE AWAKE

Need some assistance making that morning wake-up call on your holiday of choice? Try these highly caffeinated gifts

Krups XP2070 Coffee and Espresso Machine ($299)
Ever feel like you need to juice up to get your game on? This combo machine makes both coffee and espresso and is programmable to brew just what you want when you want it. (krups.com)



Spazzstick Caffeinated Lip Balm ($2.99)
After you've showered in caffeine, apply some generously to your lips. It's available in your choice of vanilla toffee or cool mint. (thinkgeek.com)

DON'T MISS THESE GAMES

Here's the useful part of the guide: The games you should own this year

- ☐ Battle for Middle-earth II

- ☐ City Life

SOUND GIFTS

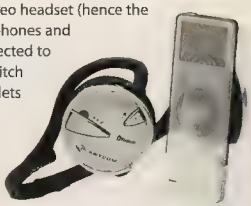
Because you occasionally need to hear something

Onkyo HT-S990THX 7.1 system ($1,099)
You don't just watch movies, especially the latest high-definition features with Blu-Ray or HD-DVD. And while lots of companies make a home theater in a box, this THX certified system's seven two-way satellite speakers deliver a true 360-degree soundstage. (onkyo.com)

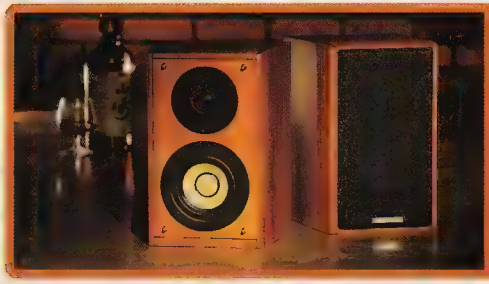
Acoustic Research Home Decor Speakers ($899)
Not only does this system sound good, but its optional speaker covers ($40 to $80 each) will let you hide the speakers. Of course, having a Martha Stewart–styled décor would help even more. (audiovox.com)

Plantronics Pulsar 590E Bluetooth Stereo Headset ($139)
This set of wireless Bluetooth headphones also comes with a universal adapter that lets you plug them into any iPod, PC, PDA, TV, MP3 player, etc. It's cheap, too. (plantronics.com)

Anycom BSH-100 ($119)
This wireless Bluetooth stereo headset (hence the "BSH") works with mobile phones and any PC. It can also be connected to two devices, letting you switch between them. An add-on lets you hook it up to any MP3 player or TV, and another (the BluNa) lets you connect it to an iPod Nano. (anycom.com)



Shure E500PTH Sound Isolating Earphones ($499)
Can you really put a price on silence? You can, and it's $500. But these earbuds practically block out the outside world. These headphones, like Shure's other models, sure are incredible. (shure.com)



[redacted]

[redacted]

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

[redacted]

USB STANDS FOR FUN

Gifts for people who want to plug a bunch of crazy crap into their PCs

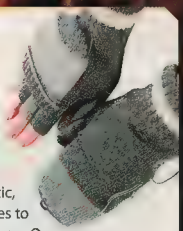
Zariganiworks Self Destruction Button ($62)
This four-port USB hub should impress all of your post-nuclear friends. Expensive? Yes. Useful? Yes. Stupid? You got it. (geekstuff4u.com)

CoolIT Beverage Chiller ($29)
Is your drink getting warm? Why get up out of your chair to get some ice cubes when you can keep it nice and cool with this fine device? (coolitsystems.com)

Kingston Data Traveler Mini Fun ($17-$40)
Though it's hard not to cringe at the name (when's the "Happy, Happy, Joy, Joy" version coming out?), these get extra points for being incredibly tiny and LEGO-like. Who doesn't love everything LEGO-like? Terrorists, that's who. (kingston.com)

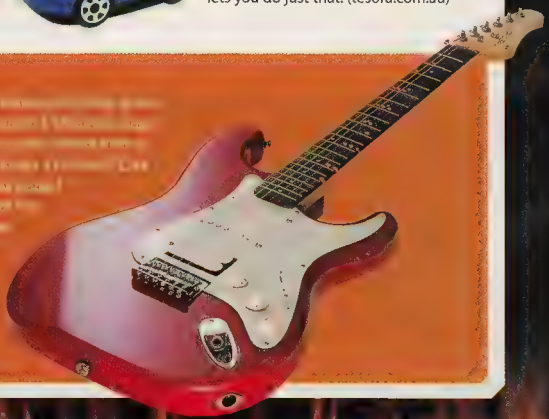
USB Ashtray on wheels ($22)
Now, this might be useful. If you smoke while using your PC, you know how gross it gets. But this USB device sucks the smoke through a filter. And, if you're not into that whole smoking thing, you can put scented pellets or potpourri in its tray and annoy even more people than you would if you did smoke. (funusb.com)

FunUSB Hot Hands ($22)
If you're working in an office in the Arctic, use these USB gloves to keep your hands warm. Or just open your case and let your CPU keep you hot. (funusb.com)



USB Pencil Sharpener ($17)
Who uses pencils nowadays? Enough people for there to be a need for a USB pencil sharpener. This one is even kind of blingy, producing a light show as it works. How did people manage to sharpen pencils before this? (usbgeek.com)

Tesora Blast Off USB Missile Launcher ($54.95 AUD)
Sometimes your co-workers piss you off so much you just want to fire a USB-powered foam missile at them. And what do you know, this product lets you do just that. (tesora.com.au)

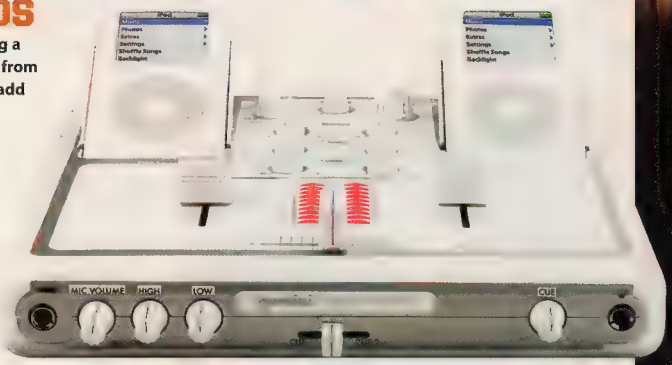


DON'T MISS THESE GAMES

☐ Prey

iCRAP FOR iPODS

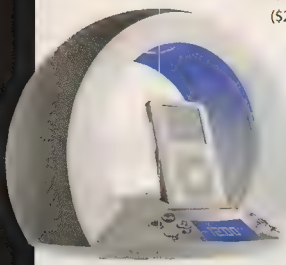
Since everyone has an iPod, is getting a newer iPod, or plans on stealing one from Best Buy over the holidays, why not add some bling?



Gemini DJ iTRAX Mixing Console

($229)

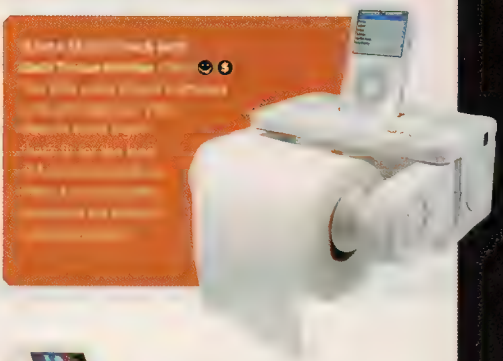
You probably don't have the chops to spin at a big city club, but that shouldn't stop you from playing DJ at the neighbor's anniversary party or your nephew's birthday. This device lets anyone with a pair of iPods become a true mix-master. God help us all. (geminidj.com)



JBL On Time Docking Station

($299)

Doesn't everyone make an iPod docking station? Yes, but few offer such high-fidelity sound at a relatively affordable price. This unit also features an AM/FM radio and dual alarms that work with your iPod, so you can wake up to your music. (jbl.com)



Micro Optical myvu Personal Media Viewer

($399)

Sure, the iPod video screen is nice, but it's sort of small. Tiny. Minuscule, even. With the myvu, it's blasted right to your eyeballs, with full 320-line resolution. It works extremely well, and it's like watching TV in the future, one in which we all look like we have crap plugged directly into our heads. (myvu.com)

Nyko Speaker Dock 2 ($79)

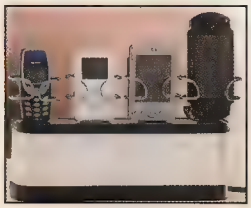
This iPod dock generates surprisingly good sound from its small, er, pod-like speakers. It has adapters for multiple iPod models, plus it charges your player when it's on AC power. And it's sort of jealous of the JBL dock. (nyko.com)

☐ Titan Quest

☐ Star Wars: Empire at War

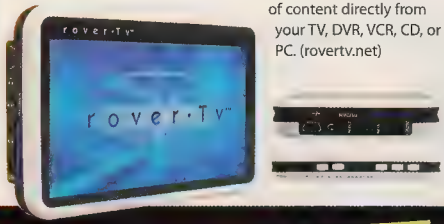
YAARR, AVAST YE MEDIA MATEY

You know you're "ripping" everything to your PC nowadays. And by "ripping" we mean "downloading it from Pirate Bay." So here are some ways to increase your enjoyment of your "media"



Digital Innovations CleanDR Power Docking Station ($29)
From the "department of useful gadgets" comes this docking station for four different mobile electronic devices. It'll handle cellphones, PDAs, iPods, PSPs, you name it. Reduce clutter. Dock away. (digitalinnovations.com)

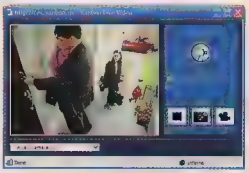
Doghouse Electronics RoverTV ($349)
Are there really times when you need to watch TV shows on a four-inch widescreen display? Of course there are. This pocket-sized mobile player can record up to six hours of content directly from your TV, DVR, VCR, CD, or PC. (rovertv.net)



CREEPED OUT

Some gifts are cool, some are weird. And some are kind of creepy

Wild Planet Spy Video Car ($159)
Need to save the day, or just want to spy on the neighbors? This RC car features a lightweight camera, complete with night-vision, and you can view the action using glasses with a single LCD lens. No one will be the wiser. (wildplanet.com)



Motorola Homesight ($199)
The PR spin says, "Give the gift of peace-of-mind," though this batch of cameras that stream live video and sound to your mobile phone implies otherwise. Because when it comes to gifts, nothing says, "I care" quite like "I want to track you 24/7." (xanboo.com)

Logitech Wireless DJ Music System ($249)
If your PC is serving as the central depository for all your music, this device will let you manage those tunes, along with Internet radio, podcast, and music services, from up to 150 feet away via Bluetooth. It's yet another reason never to leave the couch. (logitech.com)

SIRIUS Stiletto ($349)
This radio will let you do a lot more than just listen to Howard Stern. You can tune in to SIRIUS Internet Radio with a connection to a Wi-Fi network, and even download and manage MP3/WMA files. Best of all, you can take it on the go with up to 100 hours of stored content. (sirus.com)

Kingston K-PEX100 ($179)
If you're looking for a sort of ghetto Nano, here you go. The interface is cheesy, but it has 2GB of storage and a mini SD slot, plays video and music, has an FM radio receiver, displays photos, and even includes a couple of rudimentary games. It won't impress anyone, but it gets the job done. (kingston.com)

Motorola Oakley ROKR MP3 Sunglasses ($99)
Move over, Bond: These wireless Bluetooth MP3 sunglasses let you talk on your phone, listen to music, and still protect your eyes from the sun. Who says chic can't be geek, or vice versa? (motorola.com)

Samsung K5 Digital Audio Player ($209/$259)
Available in a 2GB and 4GB version, this MP3 player looks like it could use a diet, but a flip of the wrist reveals its built-in speaker, which actually packs quite a punch. Who says everyone shouldn't enjoy your music while you're on the go? (samsung.com)

DIAL G FOR GIFT

Who doesn't want the gift of telephony? Mobile or land-locked, here are some primo choices

LG VX8500 Chocolate ($149)
What's not to love about this sleek phone? It doubles as a portable music player, works as an alarm clock, features a video player and 1.3-megapixel camera, and supports Mobile Web 2.0. The only thing that would make it better is if you could actually eat it. (lge.com)

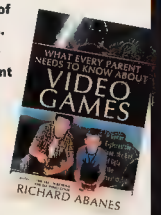
Motorola C51 Home Communications System ($79)
There are at least three people in the country who don't have a cell phone—one of them, in fact, may or may not be the editor-in-chief of this magazine. For them, this full-featured 5.8GHz land-line cordless phone system may be a good choice. It has video, a camera, and a hands-free intercom. (motorola.com)

Motorola MOTORAZR v3i ($249)
This is as cutting edge as a mobile can get. The Cingular network phone supports J2ME games, screen savers, and MP3 ringtones. It's iTunes compatible and features a hot-swappable MicroSD memory card so you can quickly transfer music and photos. A DG model includes a Dolce & Gabbana lanyard and gold eel-skin case, for a particularly blingy touch. (motorola.com)

GET STUFFED

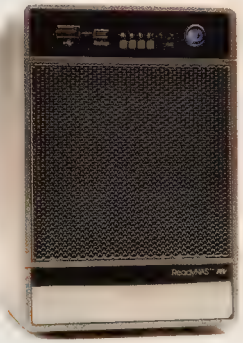
Gifts for insertion in non-denominationally-specific foot coverings

Jinx.com has expanded its line of game-related shirts and crap with World of WarCraft gear. Who doesn't want a "Horde" or "Alliance" T-shirt? How about buttons? Hats? You name it, they have it.... All of these electronic doo-dads here can't power themselves, so go for the gift of power. Panasonic's Oxyride Extreme Power Batteries and Energizer's e2 Titanium line are the choice of the Mountain Dew generation because of their extreme power-ness. (And yes, we included the batteries because they sent us samples; we can be bought, and it only costs $4.)... If you're unable to convince your parents that you're not going to turn into serial killers because you play games, maybe the book What Every Parent Needs to Know About Video Games will help. Author Richard Abanes does an excellent job dispelling some of the "games are evil" myths.... You may have noticed that console games are kind of expensive, so maybe it's time to sign up for a rental service. GameFly offers subscription gift cards for those interested in playing a lot of different games for very short amounts of time, while GameznFlix mixes games and movies. Both can be had for around $20/month.... If you're looking to give a gift certificate to a very special geek, pick one up at ThinkGeek.com. He or she will thank you, particularly if the caffeinated soap is still available.... Fans of Rome: Total War may want to pick up Rome: The Complete First Season on DVD. While it has less strategy than the game, it does have more full-frontal nudity.



MUZAK FOR THE MASSES

Now, here's a gift set that will give you year-round listening pleasure



So, you're using your PC as your media center. You have all of your music sitting in that "My Music" folder. Wouldn't you like to make it accessible in another part of your house... say, your living room? Various devices let you do this nowadays, but the Slim Devices SqueezeBox ($249/$299) is the slickest, especially when paired with the Infrant ReadyNAS NV ($649-$1199).

The SqueezeBox has multiple audio outputs for plugging into a home stereo or other audio device. If you plug it into your network via Ethernet or wirelessly run its SlimServer on the PC with your music files, you have access to your entire music library through the device. (You can also access RSS feeds and listen to Internet radio.) The SlimServer software runs on Windows, Linux, and MacOS. Though it's a bit clunky to set up playlists using its web interface, it accepts standard ones generated by every music player on the planet.

But it's still not an ideal solution, because your PC has to be on to access your music. There's an alternative: Hook it up to the ReadyNAS NV. This network attached storage device is a tiny enclosure full of hard drives (up to four). In reality, it's a little computer running embedded Linux, and it appears on your network as a file server. It can run in any RAID configuration you like for speed or safety, and you can hot swap out failed drives while the machine is running. If you want to protect your media, this is the way to do it. (It even has USB 2.0 ports for plugging in shared printers or hard drives for external backups.)

SlimDevices has partnered with Infrant, meaning SlimServer runs natively on the ReadyNAS. So you can put all of your music and media on the ReadyNAS, protect it from a hard drive failure thanks to the redundancies of RAID, and have your music accessible via your SqueezeBox at all times.

They work together flawlessly: It's a terrific way to fill your house with music 24/7.

GRAB BAG

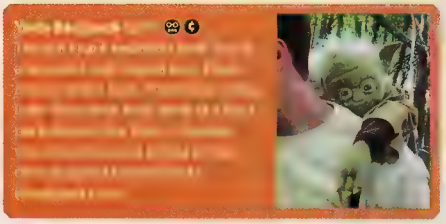
These fine gifts defy classification; OK, they just didn't fit neatly into the other categories

Jazwares Marvel Heroes Ani-Movie Studio ($59)
Create your own animated movies with this interesting device. It connects to your TV and uses a built-in digital camera to let you create your own stop-motion animated action movies. Pose your own figures, use their backgrounds (or your own), shoot a frame, move your model, shoot another… and days/months/years later, *voilà*, instamovie. Now, post it on YouTube and be famous. (jazwares.com)

AK Rocker 200 ($79)
This "gaming chair" is shaped like a racing seat. You can even purchase different "skins" for it. Just make sure no one sees you sitting in the thing. (bestbuy.com)

Bosu Fitness Quick Hands Bola Trainer ($29)
Designed for athletes who want to speed up and improve their reactions, hand-eye coordination, and dexterity, this odd device might also help improve your mouse/keyboard skills. It's literally two foam balls attached with a bungee-like cord, and you throw, catch, and generally fling the thing around like you're a human tetherball pole. Warning: It does suggest you wear groin protection during use. (bolatrainer.com)

Dyson Root 6 Hand Held Vacuum ($149)
Cleaning up every month or so might be a good idea. To help with this task, the Dyson Root 6 handheld sucks without sucking. And since it looks like a laser gun, it actually makes vacuuming kinda cool. (dyson.com)



Kensington Contour Terrain Notebook Backpack ($49)
Compact enough that you can take it on the go without feeling like you're off to war, this backpack still provides plenty of pockets for all those necessary phones, PDA, PSPs, and other must-have gadgets. It's rugged enough for the daily grind, yet stylish enough so you don't look like you're ready for the fifth grade. (kensington.com)

Sharp UXB800SE Broadband Fax ($159)
Fax machines are so 20th century, but this one lets you send PDFs or scans of your documents via e-mail over your Ethernet connection. (sharp.com)

Zerk LX Game Lounge ($199)
This "gamer chair" is oddly shaped and only comfortable for people of a certain size/shape. But if you fit in the thing, it's pretty comfortable for long play sessions. (thezerk.com)

CHIPS & BITS

www.chipsbits.com

PSP

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops features an original storyline that follows from the events of Metal Gear Solid 2: Snake Eater and boasts ground-breaking online play that lets gamers recruit comrades to form a unique fighting force.

$39.99

Superman Returns: The Videogame

In Superman Returns: The Videogame, you explore and protect the truly living city of Metropolis – one that is not only expansive (with 80 sq miles and over 9,000 buildings), but also changes dynamically with you as you affect gameplay.

$39.99

Call of Duty 3

Call of Duty 3 brings players closer to the fury of combat as they fight through the Normandy Breakout in a unique shooting adventure for PSP that shows a second side to the events in the console game. Also featured is 4-player multiplayer.

$39.99

Star Wars: Lethal Alliance

Star Wars: Lethal Alliance immerses players in an adventure that takes place between Episode III Revenge of the Sith and Episode IV A New Hope. Gamers will engage in collaborative gameplay as they embody both Twi'lek Rianna Saren and her security droid Zeeo.

$39.99

Thrillville

Thrillville lets you experience a fully interactive and customizable amusement park where you can play dozens of midway minigames, interact with your park guests, and even build and ride roller coasters and over 100 attractions.

$39.99

Sonic Rivals

In heated head-to-head races Sonic and his opponent trip, shove and vault over each other using boost moves and power ups while hurtling toward the finish line at breakneck speeds.

$39.99

Painkiller: Hell Wars

Gothic Story, Frantic Gameplay. Painkiller is an award-winning first-person horror shooter, designed to satisfy a gamer's hunger for intense, fast-paced action. It's an adrenaline addict's nightmare, where hellish monsters swarm in seemingly endless mobs.

$39.99

Online Chess Kingdoms

Online Chess Kingdoms is a chess game that adds new twists to classic chess rules, such as Speed Chess mode, and a infrastructure play in which gamers join teams and play for control of territory in a persistent online world.

$29.99

All images for display purposes only • Prices subject to change

XBOX 360

Superman Returns: The Videogame

In Superman Returns: The Videogame, you explore and protect the truly living city of Metropolis – one that is not only expansive (with 80 sq miles and over 9,000 buildings), but also changes dynamically with you as you affect gameplay.

$59.99

College Hoops 2k7

Shoot for the Final Four with the 2007 entry in Visual Concepts' and 2K Sports' college b-ball game. Leadership makes a difference this year, as team chemistry plays a vital role in a team's performance—especially come tournament time.

$59.99

Dead or Alive Xtreme 2

Another round of sun and fun on the beach awaits in this volleyball side-project sequel from Tecmo. The girls of DOA take a break from snapping necks and kicking in skulls to bounce around in beach volleyball challenges and minigames.

$59.99

Two Worlds

Two Worlds is role-playing game with emphasis on combat and world exploration that promises to take interactivity and storytelling to another level - giving gamers a real chance to shape the world around them, while enjoying mind-blowing visuals.

$59.99

Your Source for Games

PC • Xbox • Xbox 360 • PlayStation 2 • Nintendo GameCube • Nintendo DS • PSP • GBA and More!

XBOX

Capcom Classics Collection Vol. 2

Capcom Classics Collection Vol. 2 reacquaints players with the revolutionary games of their time while providing countless rounds of quarter-free entertainment. Each treasured favorite contains bountiful bonus features including remixed soundtracks, original art and history that will leave everyone wanting for more.

$19.99

Eragon

This epic fantasy-adventure centers on a young farm boy named Eragon whose destiny is revealed with the help of a dragon. Eragon is swept into a world of magic and power, discovering that he alone has the power to save — or destroy — an Empire.

$49.99

Thrillville

Thrillville lets you experience a fully interactive and customizable amusement park where you can play dozens of midway minigames, interact with your park guests, and even build and ride roller coasters and over 100 attractions.

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$39.99

DDR Ultramix 4 Bundle

DDR Ultramix 4 continues the series, this time also offering super-easy levels for beginners, as well as hard content for advanced players. It also has online competitive modes, as well as downloadable song packs.

$59.99

Xiaolin Showdown

Xiaolin Showdown sends players on an action-packed quest to seek out and protect the Shen Gong Wu, magical artifacts of supernatural power. Gamers will take the young warriors on a globetrotting adventure to locate the mystical objects and fight for their safekeeping one showdown at a time.

$29.99

Rayman: Raving Rabbids

This new Rayman game features the funniest, zaniest, wackiest antics ever when the world of Rayman is threatened by a devastating invasion of demonic rabbits! With the help of magical creatures, Rayman must battle to save his world from the bunnies.

$29.99

All images for display purposes only • Prices subject to change

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

A riveting sci-fi action shooter for the Xbox 360. Set within the merciless frozen tundra of a hostile planet, humans struggle for survival as conflicts arise between man, the surrounding indigenous creatures and the monstrous beings that have invaded.

$59.99

WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007

The WWE knocks the snot out of the world with an all-new multi-platform wrestling smackfest. New additions this year include a brand new analog control grappling system, new high-impact movesets, user-controlled environmental hotspots and an interactive fighting area within the crowd.

$59.99

Mobile Ops: The One Year War

A next-generation mechanized shooter that retells the story of the One Year War of Gundam lore with detailed next-gen graphics, a wide array of giant mobile suits, and intense multi-player combat.

$59.99

Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway

Brothers In Arms Hell's Highway drops you into Operation Market-Garden, the largest airborne operation of World War II. Lead Matt Baker, Joe Hartsock and the rest of the 101st Airborne Division as they fight to open "Hell's Highway" in a daring bid for a quick end to the war.

$59.99

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CHIPS & BITS

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PS2

Mercury Meltdown Remix

Take control of a liquid mercury blob, guiding it around traps, door switches, spikes, moving floors and other hazardous elements in order to complete the level in, Mercury Meltdown Remix.

$39.99

Naruto Uzumaki Chronicles

Naruto: Uzumaki Chronicles introduces a lush, never-before-seen 3D world that will test the players' Ninjutsu skills as Naruto, the feisty orphan who wants to become the most respected and admired ninja of all time.

$39.99

College Hoops 2k7

Shoot for the Final Four with the 2007 entry in Visual Concepts' and 2K Sports' college b-ball game. Leadership makes a difference this year, as team chemistry plays a vital role in a team's performance—especially come tournament time.

$19.99

Test Drive Unlimited

Test Drive Unlimited is the only game that immerses you into the car and bike enthusiast lifestyle, with total freedom to race however and wherever you want within a huge, online persistent environment.

$39.99

Made Man

Made Man is based on real-world events, allowing players to assume the role of Joey Verola as he is indoctrinated into the dark world of organized crime and relive his life — every moment, every kill — as he rises through the ranks to become a "Made Man".

$39.99

Jackass: The Game

Jackass is a multi-event game based on the popular TV show and featuring many of its characters.

$39.99

Capcom Classics Collection Vol. 2

A second compilation of Capcom's greatest hits from its arcade catalog. Also featured are concept artwork and other special features to enhance the experience of revisiting these classics. Vol. 2 features 20 more classic Capcom games, including brawlers, platformers, and side-scrollers.

$19.99

Call of Duty 3

Through the eyes of four Allied soldiers, Call of Duty 3 brings players closer than ever to the fury of combat as they fight through the Normandy Breakout, the harrowing offensive that liberated Paris and changed the fate of the world.

$49.99

All images for display purposes only • Prices subject to change

PC

Call of Juarez

Call of Juarez is a western-themed FPS adventure. The game's plot is located in 19th century Wild West, with the player taking the roles of Billy, a sneaking fugitive, and the reverend Ray, the uncompromising bounty hunter on his trail.

$39.99

World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusades

World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusades is the exciting new expansion to Blizzard's award-winning massively multiplayer online role-playing game. It expands the game by tremendous bounds, adding new races, lands, Battlegrounds, professions and items, and more.

$39.99

CellFactor: Revolution

CellFactor is an FPS with an epic storyline, set in a warefare industrial atmosphere. It features 3 playable main characters, each with distinctive play styles.

$49.99

Battle For Middle-Earth II: The Rise of the Witch-King

The Rise of the Witch-king tells the story of the evil Witch-king's rise to power, domination of Angmar and invasion of the great kingdom of Arnor, home to Aragorn's ancestors. You can delve into even more campaigns based on The Lord of the Rings movie trilogy.

$29.99

Your Source for Games

PC • Xbox • Xbox 360 • PlayStation 2 • Nintendo GameCube • Nintendo DS • PSP • GBA and More!

GAMECUBE

Legend of Zelda Twilight Princess

When an evil darkness enshrouds the land of Hyrule, a young farm boy named Link must awaken the hero – and the animal – within. When link travels to the Twilight Realm, he transforms into a wolf and must scour the land with the help of a mysterious girl named Midna.

$49.99

Tomb Raider: Legend

Gaming's most famous heroine makes her triumphant return in Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend! Lara Croft travels the globe in search of an ancient artifact and is pitted against rival forces…

$29.99

Chameleon Controller

Chameleon for Gamecube is a full-featured Gamecube controller with an added turbo fire feature. Chameleon has a totally see-thru case. Case is not only cool but allows you to see everything that is going on inside the controller.

$14.99

Eragon

This epic fantasy-adventure centers on a young farm boy named Eragon whose destiny is revealed with the help of a dragon. Eragon is swept into a world of magic and power, discovering that he alone has the power to save — or destroy — an Empire.

$39.99

Family Guy

Family Guy is a action/adventure game focusing on the lovable oaf Peter Griffin, his world domination-obsessed son Stewie and their talking, martini-drinking dog, Brian. Throughout the game, these popular characters wreak havoc in many of the same locations depicted in the animated series.

$39.99

Superman Returns: The Videogame

In Superman Returns: The Videogame, you explore and protect the truly living city of Metropolis – one that is not only expansive (with 80 sq miles and over 9,000 buildings), but also changes dynamically with you as you affect gameplay.

$39.99

Backyard Basketball 2007

Hit the court with NBA superstar Paul Pierce and other basketball heroes as kids—LeBron James, Shaquille O'Neal, Allen Iverson, Dwyane Wade, Tracy McGrady, Yao Ming, and more.

$29.99

Gamecube System Carrying Case

The Nintendo Gamecube System "Carrying Case stores and protects complete Nintendo Gamecube system, hardware, up to 4 Controllers and accessories. The carrying case also has an adjustable shoulder strap for a more comfortable fit.

$24.99

All images for display purposes only • Prices subject to change

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas

The stakes are high when the world's most elite counter-terrorism unit enters Las Vegas. "Sin City," the home of the famous Las Vegas Strip, flashy hotels, high-rolling casinos and world-famous celebrities, becomes the setting for a terrorist threat of global proportions.

$49.99

Medieval 2: Total War

Continuing the Total War strategy franchise, Medieval II spans four and half centuries of the most turbulent and bloody era of Western history, encompassing the golden age of chivalry, the Crusades, the proliferation of gunpowder, the rise of professional armies, the Renaissance and the discovery of America.

$49.95

Gothic 3

Gothic III provides a living world where the players can freely choose the way they want to play; whether exploring the world and enjoying its rich and enchanted atmosphere or following a darker path, and even ultimately destroying it.

$49.99

Specnaz: Project Wolf

This first-person shooter lets players assume the role of a Russian Special Forces soldier. At your side is a military trained wolf which can aid in your battles for at least 60% of the game.

$49.99

Chips & Bits Inc., 65 Millet Street, Richmond, VT 05477
phone: 802.434.6682 • toll free: 800.699.4263 • fax: 802.329.2135

This does a better job telling the story of Star Wars than any other game. Hell, it's more fun than actual movies.

Block Party

A perfect storm of geekdom, **LEGO Star Wars II** makes the original trilogy fun again BY STEVE BAUMAN

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

RATING ★★★★½ **GENRE** Restorer of Childhood Memories **DEVELOPER** Traveller's Tales **PUBLISHER** LucasArts **ESRB** Everyone 10+ **REQUIREMENTS** 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

There was a time when no one took *Star Wars* seriously. Sure, everyone loved it. It was, and still is, one of the best pieces of escapist popcorn entertainment ever created. But then everyone started taking it very seriously, first with this "hero's journey" nonsense that took it from "pulp serial" to "epic" and later with the constant tinkering and way too much fanboy analysis.

Leave it to Traveller's Tales to reclaim *Star Wars* from George Lucas and the fanboys. *LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy* is a fantastic game for people of all ages. It's easy for kids or nongamers, yet it still offers over 20 hours of serious gameplay—more, if you start getting obsessive and go for 100% completion. (A quick, 12-hour or so run through all the movies puts you at under 60% completion. Awesome.) More importantly, it puts the fun back in the series.

Once you get over the hook—ohmygod, it's playable *Star Wars*… in LEGO!—you're left with a superb action/adventure, one with tons of exploration, lots of secrets to uncover, and an almost puppy dog–like insistence that you love it. While it's available for every platform in existence, the PC version has a couple of minor issues. One kind of moves beyond "minor": The game refuses to install for a significant number of people. (A patch was issued a couple of days after launch.) In addition, the default keyboard controls require three hands to operate. This problem is easily solved by a gamepad, which is the ideal controller for this type of game.

Overall, *LEGO Star Wars II* improves on its predecessor in every meaningful way. It's a two-player co-op game where someone else can drop in and out at will, though its lack of internet play is unfortunate. When playing solo, you can jump between characters at will. (You can have as many as five characters along for the ride, though there's still a max of two players. And for some reason, they can't actually kill anyone; you need to dispose of every foe manually.) You progress through the stories from the original trilogy, reliving all of the major plot points of the original *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*. And fanboy purists, get your outrage ready, because Greedo and Han Solo appear to fire simultaneously, and R2-D2 can still fly.

The majority of missions take place with multiple characters on foot, running around LEGO versions of the environments you know so well. But others recreate the epic space battles. The vehicle controls are im-

proved considerably, though it's still mostly button mashing.

Ah, but what glorious button mashing. Everything blows up and drops LEGO pieces, or turns into other LEGO pieces you can reassemble into something else. This may be the ultimate obsessive/compulsive collection game. There are tons of features, vehicles, secret areas, and playable characters you can unlock by cashing in these pieces.

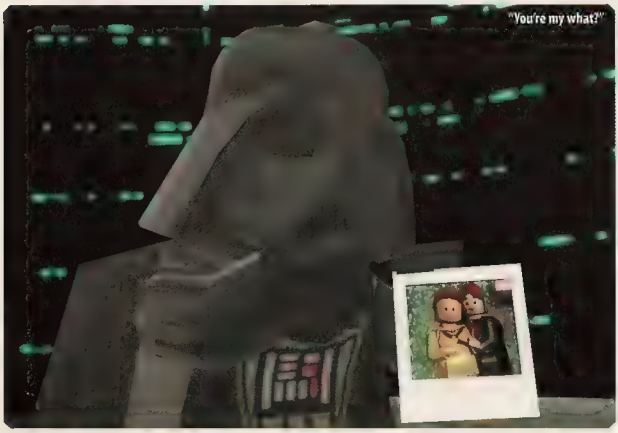
The extra characters are useful, because there are two ways to play each level: Story Mode and Free Play. In Story Mode, you use characters that are designed for that level and match the movies. In Free Play, you can freely switch among any characters you've encountered or purchased, and most have unique features that let you access new areas to find items that unlock even more characters.

"This may be the ultimate obsessive/compulsive collection game."

What takes the game to another level, besides the familiarity of the material, is the huge disconnect between what's on the screen (cute LEGO characters) and the bombastic, John Williams–esque score. This combination makes it the funniest game of the year—the "I'm your father" scene is probably one of the best scenes in any videogame, ever. As in the original game, there's no dialogue. But the pantomime "acting" and the appropriate grunts, squawks, and beeps prove better at telling the story than the wooden performances Lucas elicits from even the best of his human actors. Besides, you fill in the blanks.

In addition to all this, there's something to be said for the quality of the production and design. The art direction is superb, but the design—credited to Jon Burton, James Cunliffe, John Hodkinson, and James Kay—is brilliant. Where most games put up constant barriers, here it's like Traveller's Tales actually wants you to finish. The game constantly moves forward, with nothing breaking the flow. If you die, you respawn a few seconds later in the exact same spot, minus a few LEGO pieces. There are tons of puzzles, which are always logical and clever, although a couple seemed broken and required a reload.

But the best thing about *LEGO Star Wars II* is that it taps back into the escapist sense of fun of the original trilogy, dispensing with the solemn talk of trade embargoes, Midchlorians, and being "The Chosen One." If you're both player and fan, it helps you recapture the feeling you had when you saw the original trilogy for the first time. ■



Hamming it up in front of the Oilers faithful.

NHL 07

Another repeat offender for EA Sports

RATING ★★ **GENRE** Very Familiar Sim **DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER** EA Sports **ESRB** Everyone **REQUIREMENTS** 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Everyone has gotten used to EA Sports' roster-patch-and-shinier-helmets idea of making a "sequel." But with *NHL 07*, the company is offering a lukewarm second serving of last year's game that lacks key new features found in the Xbox 360 version. So you're still paying to experience *déjà vu* on ice, with the added insult of not getting the best edition of the game currently available.

It comes down to controls. For the first time in, well, ever, EA Sports has totally revamped the control scheme for its *NHL* franchise by remapping most button functions to the right analog stick. Now, instead of hitting buttons to pass and shoot, you simply push this "Skill Stick" to dish off the puck and flip it back and forth to launch slappers and wristers on net. This system works great, too, giving games a natural, hockey-like feel that this pinball-on-ice series has needed for years.

But you need a 360 to experience this superlative shinny. On the PC and all console systems without triple digits in their names, all the right stick does is handle passing. This is an upgrade compared with the old buttons-for-almost-everything system of past *NHL* games, but only a marginal one, since the best feature of Skill Stick is the ability to mimic the motions of shooting a puck. While right-stick passing makes for more realistic matches, by removing some of the button-pushing that has always interfered with the natural flow of hockey, it just doesn't feel right without the ability to shoot in the same fashion.

NHL 07 on the PC isn't entirely dissimilar

[top] As in the real-life "new" NHL, every little grab and shove now warrants a penalty. [above] Rolly the Goalie says cheese.

to its 360 counterpart. Unfortunately, the most noteworthy shared feature is a train-wreck of an interface, featuring awkward menus, sporadic mouse support, and bugs. It's practically impossible to edit lines manually. The mouse often doesn't work when scrolling down player lists, the game refuses to let you swap players at certain times, and the arrow icon letting you move between offensive, defensive, and special-teams units frequently vanishes until you pull up and then exit a player information screen.

All that said, this remains a pretty good hockey game on the ice, and it's a worthwhile pick-up if you don't have a 360 or own last year's model for the PC. Games are insanely speedy, and players can stickhandle as if the puck were secured to their blades with Velcro, but the gameplay isn't as divorced from reality as you might think. Virtually every aspect of it can be adjusted with slider bars, so you can mold the on-ice action into a reasonable facsimile of real hockey, with respectable stats when it comes to the big numbers like shots-on-goal and goals scored.

Career options have been beefed up a bit, too. Dynasties can now be forged in the game's European leagues, which have been bolstered with the addition of the Czech Tipsport Extraliga. EA has added minor-league rosters to each club, although they function solely as a way to hide players from the salary cap, as you don't play or track games with these affiliate teams. Frills like personality settings for GMs and team upgrades gained by earning the trust of your owner round out the new feature list.

Everything else, however, has been held over from last year. All the game modes are the same. Visuals look just as they did 12 months ago. In general, this means that the game is gorgeous, but player faces still range from mirror images like Eric Staal, who comes with his trademark pout, to hack jobs like Cam Ward, who just needs bolts in his neck to star in a remake of *Frankenstein*. Audio is a straight rip from last year's game as well. Jim Hughson and Craig Simpson repeat the same lines in the broadcast booth (incidentally, another exclusive 360 feature is all-new commentary from Gary Thorne and Bill Clement), and the soundtrack is stuffed with another selection of irritating alt-rock tunes.

If you really want to play hockey this winter and have your heart set on *NHL 2007*, pick up a 360. Otherwise, you're better off getting your hockey fix from *NHL 2006*, available for less than $10 in a bargain bin near you. **–Brett Todd**

TOP SELLERS

AUGUST 2006

1. **World of WarCraft**
   Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★★
2. **The Sims 2**
   Electronic Arts ★★★★★
3. **Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff**
   Electronic Arts Not Rated
4. **Civilization IV: Warlords**
   2K Games ★★★½
5. **Sims 2: Open for Business**
   Electronic Arts ★★★★
6. **Civilization IV**
   2K Games ★★★★★
7. **Paws & Claws Pet Vet**
   Valusoft Not Rated
8. **Guild Wars: Factions**
   NCSoft ★★★★
9. **Cars: Radiator Springs Adventures**
   THQ Not Rated
10. **Age of Empires III**
    Microsoft ★★★
11. **Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion**
    Bethesda ★★★★★
12. **Sims 2 Nightlife**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★
13. **Half-Life 2: Episode I**
    Valve ★★★
14. **WarCraft III Battle Chest**
    Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★½
15. **Zoo Tycoon 2**
    Microsoft ★★★★
16. **Nancy Drew: Danger By Design**
    Her Interactive Not Rated
17. **RollerCoaster Tycoon 3 Gold**
    Atari ★★★★½
18. **Titan Quest**
    THQ ★★★½
19. **SimCity 4 Deluxe**
    Electronic Arts ★★½
20. **The Sims Complete Collection**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★½

Source: NPD Group/NPD Funworld. The August list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.

[clockwise from top left] This makes the game look way more interesting than it really is; OK, the guy in the giant burger costume is kind of funny; Behold, the easiest rail-shooter segment ever; Since she's pretty adamant about running into that wall, you'll eventually need to rescue her by leading her back to her original spot on the other side of said wall. Hello, broken scripting; Triggers didn't flip, which caused this bus to have an invisible barrier (when replayed, this area was actually clear of objects, letting you progress).

Free Fallin'

Bad Day LA is a Bad Game L.A., with Bad Gameplay L.A. and Bad Bugs L.A. BY STEVE BAUMAN

RATING ★ **GENRE** Publicity Generator **DEVELOPER** Enlight Software/Mauretania Import Export Company **PUBLISHER** Aspyr **ESRB** Mature **REQUIREMENTS** 1.6GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

There's an outsider's view of Los Angeles that looks pretty simplistic to anyone who's actually lived in the city for more than a few years. To the newbies, it's a city full of crime and shallow celebrities, of choking smog and traffic, of freeway chases and plastic newscasters. While there's a lot of truth to the stereotypes, the reality for most residents is slightly different. The city is just a bunch of suburbs of various economic levels connected by freeways packed with cars; a melting pot of people who don't always get along particularly well but are just trying to make a living. In other words, it's a lot like most cities, only cranked up to 11.

American McGee Presents Bad Day LA—the "LA" presumably means "Los Angeles" and not Louisiana—is a typical portrayal of the City of Angels. Or at least of a "typical" day on which the city is attacked by terrorists, has an earthquake, experiences a few meteor showers and a tsunami, and plunges into general chaos, which you're required to navigate with your sassy and gassy homeless character. It's supposed to tackle the "culture of fear" that makes people worry that such events might occur in the real world. But the broad "satire" makes you long for the subtle comic stylings found in *Police Academy* movies. (At least they didn't pretend to be saying something, though *Mission to Moscow* did take on the Russian mob, and may have led to the eventual ouster of Boris Yeltsin.)

The above comments assume that *Bad Day LA* is supposed to be satirical. It rolls out a lot of stereotypes—hey, Mexicans are lazy and shoot at each other! Blonde bimbos are stupid! Military guys are gung-ho! African-Americans are all homeless and/or sassy! But it does nothing with these images other than trot them out for us to laugh at. Is it satire? Parody? A straightforward comedy? Whatever you call it, it's guilty of one thing: not being funny. In fact, it's offensively unfunny.

That's not entirely true. The load screen graphics are kind of funny. In fact, the visuals are the only noteworthy part of the game. The stylized art direction by L.A.-based artists Kozyndan at least makes all the offensiveness a wee bit less, er, offensive. But the crude technology makes their 3D art look flatter than their more whimsical 2D works.

All the quality art direction in the world can't redeem the gameplay, which is terrible. (Fortunately, there isn't much of it, as the game clocks in at about 4-5 hours of play.) You spend much of your time helping people in order to keep the crowds from attacking you, plus killing zombies or the occasional Mexican. You eventually get a few sidekicks, who do little more than disappear for extended periods, only to reappear as mission objectives when they're kidnapped. The constantly vomiting kid who follows you around is a nice touch, though.

This wouldn't only be a Bad Game L.A. if it weren't for the Bad Bugs L.A. Missions break when triggers don't flip, things float in midair, and AI characters get stuck and spin in place. The sound drops out from time to time, which is somewhat of a blessing, since the dialogue and voice acting are uniformly dreadful. Your character also randomly farts when jumping; the first time this happens, it's just annoying. After a few hundred more, you may want to jab sharp objects in your ears.

If the way to take on the "culture of fear" is to throw a bunch of obvious stereotypes into a poorly realized game-world with a poorly controlling but armed and smelly homeless guy who has gas, then it's "Mission Accomplished!" for *Bad Day LA*. All of this daring controversy must have sounded great when it was pitched to Hollywood-worshipping game executives. But, like so many bad movies, *Bad Day LA* is all high concept, no execution. ■

THE SIMS 2: PETS

Do the terrier dance

RATING ★★★½ **GENRE** Animal Cruelty Simulator **DEVELOPER** Maxis **PUBLISHER** EA Games **ESRB** Teen **REQUIREMENTS** The Sims 2

Pets are such a fixture of human life that it's a little surprising that Maxis only gets around to them on the fourth expansion to *The Sims 2*. Maybe SimCollies are just that much harder to animate.

The pets come in many breeds and sizes and, like your SimPeople, can be customized at the start. You can make a golden retriever with stubby legs if you choose. Cats get the short end of the stick, visually speaking, but make up for it by being much easier to take care of.

What you'll quickly learn is that pets require a huge expenditure of time and money. Want to start with a dog? Well, you can't skimp on the tub anymore, since you'll need that to clean the sloppy beast. And prepare to replace furniture, because Rover will chew on and destroy beds, sofas, and chairs. Plus, it costs 10 simoleons a day to keep the dog fed. (Pets don't die of starvation, but you will get animal services knocking on your door to take the animal away.)

The addition of career tracks for your pets is a nice little frill. Since they only need to learn tricks to advance in status, your pet will rise through the ranks of its job much more quickly than your Sim. The idiot dog that keeps digging up the yard could enter show biz and be pulling SimTimmy out of a SimWell before the master has left the entry level.

[top] Stray dogs never seem to have rabies. [above] Dirty dogs need to eat, too.

Like every *Sims* expansion, *Pets* throws itself in your face from the moment you start play. Your Sim's every thought in the early stages will be about animals. He or she will want to adopt every stray that enters the yard, or to teach the cat new tricks. Before long, these aspirations get blended with the usual eating, self-improvement, and woo-hoo fare. Pets make it easier to keep the fun and social scores up, but they can be very demanding of your all-too-precious time. And pity the poor Sim who falls in love with someone their kitten hates.

Pets has none of the transformative gameplay of the *Open for Business* or *University* expansions, but the computerized animals have a way of humanizing their masters, rounding out the life-cycle in a game that already features aging, schooling, and death. Besides, with so many things for a Sim to worry about, isn't it relaxing to go to the park and play fetch?

–Troy S. Goodfellow

The old "dropping the bowling ball out a window" gag.

The Return of the Coffee Achievers

The first episodic Sam & Max adventure—**"Culture Shock"**—brings back the heyday of LucasArts, only at quarter size BY STEVE BAUMAN

RATING ★★★★ **GENRE** Sam & Maxian Adventure **DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER** Telltale Games
ESRB Not Rated **REQUIREMENTS** 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

There was a "golden age" of adventure games in the early-to-mid-1990s, and LucasArts was their pre-eminent publisher. Every game the company produced was an event. Arguably its most whacked-out classic of the time was 1993's *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, a standard point-and-click adventure starring a dog named Sam and his lovably sociopathic lagomorph partner Max. The duo were freelance police officers traveling across the U.S.A. and collecting a lot of crap while on the trail of a runaway carnival Bigfoot (is there any other kind?).

The 2006 edition of *Sam & Max* isn't from LucasArts. Telltale Games has picked up the mantle and turned Steve Purcell's original comic into another, slightly more modern yet still whacked-out episodic adventure. It was first made available as a download on the GameTap service in mid-October, and eventually you will be able to get it directly from Telltale. This first episode, titled "Culture Shock," finds our heroes taking on former child star Brady Culture, who's producing an exercise tape called "Eye Bo." (Who wouldn't want to lose five pounds doing ocular exercises?) Subsequent episodes are planned to follow in a month or so.

Which is a good thing, because this is one short game. Though length of play is generally a terrible way to judge a game, it's hard to get around the fact that "Culture Shock" is over awfully fast. It clocks in at a couple of hours of gameplay for even the most out-of-practice adventure gamer. There are only a half-dozen locations, with a handful of objects to use in possibly illegal (and usually destructive) ways. Most of the puzzles are pretty obvious, which wouldn't be a problem if there were more of them. Offsetting its length considerably, however, is its low cost ($8.95 per episode, or 6 for $34.95).

What also redeems the game to a degree is its clever design and writing. Written and designed by Dave Grossman and Brendan Q. Ferguson, "Culture Shock" shares with the original *Sam & Max Hit the Road* a bizarre,

> **"'Culture Shock' clocks in at a couple of hours of gameplay for even the most out-of-practice adventure gamer."**

There are some lines that, when taken out of context, are frightening.

offbeat vibe that's perfectly matched by its art direction. Both Sam and Max speak almost entirely in non-sequiturs, most of which are more clever than laugh-out-loud funny.

Though the game doesn't use the original voice actors for Sam and Max, Bill Farmer and Nick Jameson, David Nowlin and Andrew Chaikin do a fine job mimicking them. Unfortunately, belying its downloadable roots, the sound quality is mediocre. The jazzy score by Jared Emerson-Johnson is fabulous, though.

"Culture Shock" doesn't quite represent the triumphant return of the classic adventure game that fans of both the series and the genre hoped for. Still, it delivers an excellent—albeit extremely short—experience. And for anyone who's given up on point-and-clicks thanks to the myriad bad *Myst* clones, it's a terrific reminder of why those old-school games were such a blast. ■

[clockwise from top] An ambulance needs an armed escort in this town; Taking down a tyrant; Someone forgot their helmet.

JOINT TASK FORCE

We have met the enemy, and it is CNN

RATING ★★½ **GENRE** Media Blitzkrieg **DEVELOPER** Most Wanted Entertainment **PUBLISHER** HD Publishing/Vivendi Universal Games **ESRB** Teen **REQUIREMENTS** 2GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

The present hasn't been a popular setting for real-time strategy games. Unless Europe declares war on America, today's asymmetric warfare means that one side has all the hardware and the other has to make do with changing its tactics to even things out—guerrilla warfare, unconventional weapons, and so on. But no one wants to play an RTS that is all house-to-house searches or Jack Bauer heroics. That's why we have tactical shooters, after all.

Joint Task Force tries to solve the problem by making the media an enemy. Well, not the media exactly, but bad press. The JTF is an elite team assembled by the G8 to eliminate the world's bad guys, whether Somali warlords or Balkan brutes. If you kill—or just fail to protect—too many civilians, the unflattering coverage will cut into your budget or end your career.

This is the one big innovation in the story-based campaign, and it doesn't work particularly well. There's never any sense that the eyes of the world really are on you. For instance, there's an odd moment in an early scenario when you hear of militias murdering refugees, even though you destroyed all forces in the area and were just praised by the news anchor for doing so. Successful missions are often the ones that nobody reports on, though you would think someone would notice you airlifting heavy armor and supply crews into Serbia. In a world where television can also be your best friend, it's odd that the developers chose to emphasize the worst, "enemy" side.

The modern setting is novel, but nothing that last year's *Act of War* didn't do better. The current event references—preemptive strikes, 9/11, ethnic cleansing—seem designed to make you think about the world around you. The

hints of the hero's dark past are certainly topical, as America debates the limits of proper military action.

This is all well and good, appropriate to the themes of the game. But virtually all this interesting stuff happens in the cutscenes or in pre-mission narration. The only in-game reminders we get that this is an ongoing struggle are the militias massacring poorly defended UN or Red Cross outposts. Despite all the talk of a global terrorist network, you move lockstep through the regions, chasing one boss after another.

The shame of it is that the campaign game itself is above average. The cutscenes aren't great, and the flying bodies are more amusing than stirring. Still, there's a great variety of missions, and you need combined arms to be effective. Rushing in with tanks alone won't get you to the end. The theme of an elite team stuck in humanitarian disasters works well when you are told you should escort civilians to safety before you take out those anti-aircraft missiles. You can play the campaign co-op, too, though clear communication with your friend is essential.

The campaign has good scenario design. There may be only one road up a hill, but you'll find you have multiple ways of killing what's on top. The financial reward for meeting objectives must be spent wisely, including on refits for damaged equipment or anti-tank weapons, just in case. Pathfinding is erratic on many maps, but it's not always clear what the problem is. Tanks happily mow down huts and power lines even when the road is clear, but they just sit still when there is a group of friendly infantry standing in the way.

Replayability is seriously limited by the lack of enough stuff to do to make the skirmish sessions as interesting as the campaign. The three factions (JTF, Dictator, Terrorist) are your typical American/Soviet/ragtag equipment groupings, with little to distinguish them in functionality. The computer opponent is pretty lame most of the time, dashing from flag to flag before securing airstrips that provide the heavy equipment. Quick movement is certainly key to victory, but the early moments here redefine the idea of the "rush" strategy.

It doesn't help that this has been a great year for real-time strategy. Three years ago, *Joint Task Force* would have stood out. Today, it's an also-ran with a glimmer of something better inside. **–Troy S. Goodfellow**

PERIMETER: EMPEROR'S TESTAMENT

Impenetrable

RATING ★★½ **GENRE** Brain-Bending Real-Time Strategy
DEVELOPER K D Lab **PUBLISHER** Paradox Interactive
ESRB Everyone 10+ **REQUIREMENTS** 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

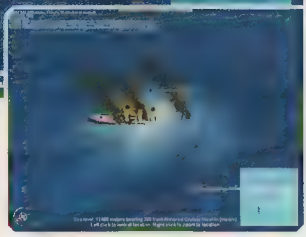
This game is weird. There's no other way to describe K-D Lab's wholly unique fiction and setting for its *Perimeter* games. Trying to decipher the technical gobbledygook contained in the first 30 minutes of *Emperor's Testament* is headache inducing.

As a stand-alone expansion to the original *Perimeter*, *Emperor's Testament* drops you in the deep end of the pool with no tutorial and little incentive to see it through. You get a mission objective, meet it somehow, and move on to the next one. Missions are a standard mix of gimmicks and grinds, with a welcome adjustable difficulty level and the terraforming that defines this series' design. Your mighty morphing ground, air, and underground combat units are given piles of fixed defenses to plow through. Most satisfying of all, the electric framework of the web of power generators you build to support your fight looks cool.

Without a tutorial, it's hard to figure out how anything works. You're often left with little in the way of clues about what's effective against what. Luckily, someone at Paradox took the time to put together a decent manual that at least gives you the basics of how to start building and terraforming. Without it, you would throw your hands up and quit during the first mission.

Time invested in *Emperor's Testament* unfortunately never really pays off. The campaign lets you fiddle with some weird stuff while it beats on other weird stuff. But it all seems so hollow and dull, despite the originality of the setting. The game certainly looks interesting in pictures, and the soundtrack is psychedelically soothing. All it's missing is the entertaining play. **–David J. Long**

[below] Stuff looks cool up close, and modern hardware makes it run smoothly. [right] The Perimeter is protection from all.



DISTANT GUNS: THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR AT SEA, 1904–1905.

Ignore that sinking feeling

RATING ★★★★ **GENRE** What War is Good For
DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER Storm Eagle Studios **ESRB** Unrated
REQUIREMENTS 1.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

History Channel documentaries notwithstanding, naval combat is hard to make thrilling. With the carrier age, a game designer can at least work in the whole hide-and-seek angle. But anything set before World War II forces you into a set-piece battle where you steer your ships around and concentrate your fire on threats as they pop up. Mastery of the seas may get you world power, but they won't make many games to honor your memory.

So calling *Distant Guns* one of the best naval combat games in recent memory may seem like damning with faint praise. Veteran game designers Norm Koger and Jim Rose take a mostly obscure war from the Dreadnought age and give you everything you expect, but with greater fidelity than usual to the sea warfare of the time.

So you won't see many dramatic explosions when guns find their targets, and a mass of destroyers will be overcome by a single battleship unless you send them in the right direction. *Distant Guns* is a deadly minuet in which you dance your ships toward the enemy, making sure that you've got more of your guns facing him than he's got facing you. There is a good selection of historical battles, as well as an excellent random battle generator that cobbles together a roughly balanced encounter that can take hours to play out.

[top] The detailed ship models make up for the slow pace of combat. [above] Down to Davey Joneski's Locker.

The campaign game is harder to appreciate than the battle engine. The moving and mixing of fleets is classic wargame stuff, but it doesn't seem to have received the same attention as the combat engine. Where the battles have a nice flyout menu and reminders at the bottom of the screen about which mouse button does what, your time with the campaign will be heavily reliant on the description in the 200-page PDF manual. A proper in-game tutorial would have been greatly appreciated. The campaign is good, but it takes too long to understand what your priorities are.

At its heart, *Distant Guns* is a bathtub battleship game, designed for people who like to sail boats around and sink other boats. Model makers will love the attention to ship design, and grognards will like the fine tuning that any safe approach demands. There aren't many good games based on big gun battleships. We can add one more. **–TSG**

STARSTRUCK

Everyone has an opinion, and some aren't afraid to share it on websites. Since no one trusts the press, here are some "real gamer" reviews of some recent releases, in their own words, with their own unique interpretations of the English language.

Bad Day LA

"I dont know why yall say this game is bad there are sirtenly worse gmaes than this . Some of the humor in the game is funny, and runin arround and killing people is fun. Of course it's not worth paying for , better trie it , i would never spend my money on it. Anywhays , u don't have what to play? You have a dum friend that just bought it and already beated it , play IT!." ★★★

Company of Heroes

"This little masterpiece is everything you want in a real-time strategy game. I wasn't a fan of RTS before this gem came out and now I can't wait for the expansion pack that will offer more maps to play single player skirmishes... and perhaps even, weeeeee... a map editor! Do yourself a favor and buy this game. It's worth every penny and more." ★★★★★

LEGO Star Wars II

"THIS GAME IS A MUST HAVE FOR ALL, STAR WARS FANS! THE GRAPHICS ARE GREAT, THE ANIMATIONS ARE AMAZING FOR SUCH A GAME. THE GAME PLAY IS AW-SOME AND FUNNY. FOR $30.00 FOR THE COMPUTER I THINK IT IS A STEAL. THE ONLY THING I HATE ABOUT THE GAME. IS THAT YOU HAVE NO CONTROL OVER THE CAMERA AND IT HAS THE PROBLEM MOST GAMES LIKE THAT DO. SOMETIMES THE CAMERA DOESNT GIVE THE BEST ANGLE. BUT THAT IS A VERY SOME THING" ★★★★★

Dinosaur

Paraworld tries to deliver some modern dino-might, but ends up as the RTS that time forgot BY TOM CHICK

RATING ★★ **GENRE** Age of Empires **DEVELOPER** SEK **PUBLISHER** Aspyr **ESRB** Teen **REQUIREMENTS** 1.5Ghz CPU; 512MB RAM

Paraworld has everything you'd expect in a really good real-time strategy game. The armies are diverse and interesting. The graphics engine is lush and powerful. There are some clever twists, like artifact treasures, the hero system, and the whole dinosaur angle. There are plenty of maps and game types to sustain skirmish and online playing. There's even—and this is a rarity for the genre—an engaging single-player campaign. The interface is, for the most part, good enough. But, for various reasons, *Paraworld* doesn't hold up next to the latest RTS games. It's a bit like one of its own dinosaurs.

This isn't a cheap Euro-game. The developers at SEK clearly intend it to be an old-school, economy-based RTS like *Age of Empires*. There's a sense of enthusiasm at all levels, from the army commander interface, to the way dinosaurs elaborately eat hapless soldiers, to the outrageous unit mixes. How about some Sumo wrestlers to go with your saber-toothed tiger cavalry and brontosaurus? There's even a catchy orchestral swell in the soundtrack that you may want to leave on.

For better or worse, some of SEK's choices buck the current trends. This is a stately game, slow to develop and even slower to resolve. The maps are big, the creeps are fierce, buildings are hardy, and walls are cheap. *Paraworld* not only favors the defender, but seems to loathe dirty no-good rushers. Raiding isn't easy, and knocking over someone's base is going to be a real chore. This isn't one of those lunch-hour RTS games.

There's a traditional, almost dogmatic emphasis on economy and base-building. You spend an inordinate amount of time managing your peasants, partly because *Paraworld* imposes a limit on how much of each resource you can gather. You work around these limits by building warehouses (the specifics vary by race), which are required to save enough resources to age up. It's a bit of distracting busy work you have to attend to unless you want your peasants standing around holding bundles of resources on their heads. There's nothing quite so frustrating in an economy-based RTS as an economy that can literally come to a standstill.

While you're dealing with peasants, the battles need minding. This isn't necessarily because units have special abilities (though a few of them do). Rather, you need to herd your small armies carefully, very much in the style of *WarCraft III*. *Paraworld* also expects you to manage experience points on the fly, to heal units by leveling them up immediately before they die. It's a weird system that, like the resource cap, rewards players who can micromanage.

"Army commander" is SEK's name for a panel that shows all your units grouped by level. It's an interactive display, but it's hardly necessary and only marginally useful. In fact, it's a bit distracting in the way it lumps your peasants in with your army and splits unit types up by level. It does serve as a visual indicator of the hard army limit, which restricts how many units you can have of each level. The result is a sort of dynamic pyramid based on whom you promote. You're allowed one fifth-level unit, three fourth-level units, and so on, down to 25 first-level units.

[above left] An allosaurus lunges from its hiding spot behind the Army Commander panel. [left]If there's one thing cooler than a dinosaur, it's a dinosaur with a Gatling gun on its back. [above] A game-winning Wonder on the left and a game-winning Titan unit on the right.

As a result, *Paraworld* is almost never about merely outnumbering your opponent, which is another reason a match can take so long. Instead, the idea is that you carefully assemble and cultivate a small group. It's an odd approach for a game that tends toward matches that take an hour-plus. The pacing suggests epic battles, but the scale allows for only a few skirmishes.

The graphics are certainly pretty, and they zoom-in well. But, from a comfortable playing level, everything is a soft, bloomy mush of colors and shapes. Most maps are built from narrow passages with the occasional clearing. Bases sprawl, composed of indistinguishable buildings that jam up the pathfinding. It all gives *Paraworld* a cluttered look that gets worse when the fighting starts, accompanied by muted and inconsistent sound. This is where the better RTS games really get going. But in *Paraworld*, it's where all of SEK's work dissolves into a mess of color and special effects, huddled quietly under a mass of hovering health bars that are busy trying to resolve who's about to die. So many solid ideas, and it all comes down to this. ■

Faces of War takes place in the early 1940s, back when Americans knew what the word "liberate" meant.

FACES OF WAR

Ennui of a thousand faces

RATING ★★½ **GENRE** Alternate WWII RTS
DEVELOPER Best Way **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **ESRB** Mature
REQUIREMENTS 2GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

As an underappreciated single-player *Syndicate/Commandos* hybrid, *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II* had a pleasantly low-key addictiveness. Not that replacing tank treads, siphoning fuel, and lugging barrels around are inherently engrossing activities. But the tedium seemed to accurately capture the more wretched aspects of being in a tiny World War II squad and assigned to crappy busy work, occasionally leavened with suicide missions. The intricacy and constant micromanagement of switching guys and ammo was a grind, but it was amusingly authentic. Fighting's the easy part; it's the gruelingly cumbersome preparations that try men's souls.

Unfortunately, the sequel, *Faces of War*, has bigger fish to fry, and the designers have seriously underestimated the dimensions of their only skillet. Maybe real-time strategy's just a California thing. Released within days of THQ's *Company of Heroes*, a game with much higher production values and infinitely sharper focus, *Faces* will most likely go down in history as 2006's other WWII RTS, even if it does have a leg up in some areas.

Where *Company of Heroes* frugally depicts only Americans fighting Nazis, using a handful of basic unit types, *Faces of War* adds the Russians to the mix. It also sports an enormous variety of tanks, halftracks, trucks, cannons, cars, artillery, AA mounts, sappers, grenadiers, and even rickety aircraft that usually explode on the runway, all clashing in visually lavish battles involving troop sizes and accents that *Company of Heroes* can only dream of. If games featuring more than 10 types of grenades and anti-tank mines are your idea of heaven, look no further.

Putting it all together is another story. *Soldiers* was afflicted with glitches like aimless-to-suicidal unit pathing and the tendency of most vehicles to break down and need refueling. Those aspects are no longer so charming when you're on the clock (that "T" in "RTS" does stand for "real-time," after all). And, even though the three single-player campaigns offer moments of crunchily flaming apocalyptic splendor, the missions are just too linear, too clichéd, too glacially paced, and too *Groundhog Day* familiar to care about. You feel owed back pay.

There's no room for heroic spontaneity; you pretty much follow directions in the order they're given. An irritable commander occasionally "suggests" in voiceover that you look into performing heavily scripted secondary objectives, which is his roundabout way of informing you that your survival hinges on them, and you'll be flooded with infinite respawns or obliterated by Pershings if you dally.

"So much for George Bernard Shaw's observation that peace is more arduous than war. Huh, guys."

It doesn't help that your units are so microscopic and so similar in appearance—with *Faces* in the title, shouldn't there be more emphasis on faces? The camera control's been greatly enhanced. But, given that you need to shift your angle 90 degrees every time your guys turn a corner, thanks to the many buildings and trees obscuring your view, it's sort of a pyrrhic blessing. The interface has also allegedly been "streamlined," with myriad rows of inscrutably decorated square hieroglyphic tiles representing your soldiers' behavior settings, all collected under three gray tabs that aren't even labeled. (Maybe gray blankness is Ukrainian for three different things.) Choosing between having your squad in a wedge or a line may not help much. No configuration will prevent them from getting crushed by their own Sherman that they're refueling, if you carelessly try to change its facing before they're done.

For a squad-based game, this one has AI that's almost hypnotically stupid, with troops ignoring your commands, bumping into one another, leaving cover, and wandering off at the drop of a hat. You can play in "tactical" or "arcade" mode, which depends on how deep your interest is in unsnarling a control scheme that's fairly opaque either way. As in *Soldiers*, you're also given an option that is euphemistically referred to as "Direct Control." It lets you move with arrow keys, but you can't manipulate the rest of your guy's squad at the same time. The game's pace is so relentlessly frenetic that having such precision control is more of a challenge than a luxury.

Things are slightly better on the multiplayer end. Despite the absence of a skirmish option on which to cut your teeth, going through the missions in co-op is surprisingly enjoyable. Perhaps that's because there are few bondings as profound as shared suffering and workload. And there are some diverting rimshots, like Chicken Hunt, where you comically terrorize farmers and confiscate their poultry, and Battle Zones, the equivalent of CTF.

The designers wisely downplay all that fuel and repair maintenance in favor of breakneck action and Homerically scaled battle. But it's hard to tell what's going on, a fatal flaw in any RTS. The two sides of the conflict, instead of being labeled by their nationalities, are simply assigned the names "Team A" and "Team B," and how scoring works is anyone's guess. Sessions end just as abruptly as they start. You buy units that zone-in at a desolate section of map edge for which there's no hotkey, then find that they generally need to be ferried manually into place across vast open spaces. It's all made more annoying by having the profoundly uninformative minimap scroll you to your destination at about the same languorous rate as if you'd panned manually. There's also the confusing, arbitrary racket of ambient machine-gun fire, along with a fog of war based on strict line of sight that leaves huge swaths of your immediate vicinity to the imagination, unless you methodically maneuver each unit into facing a different way. Gameplay.

It's a bit ironic that *Faces of War* opens with a jaunty cutscene ripped straight from a Garth Ennis comic. In it, a jeepful of British chaps careen around enemy entrenchments and dodge explosions with a rip-roaring breeziness the game itself could have used. It's nice to have the option of picking between a Panzer I and a Panzer II. But, as *Company of Heroes* understands, realism has its place. **–Kelly Wand**

Big Oil

TriSynergy/Everyone

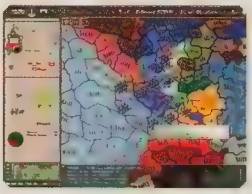
★★

There's an interesting game to be made about the oil industry. It has an innately appealing high-stakes aspect that's ripe for social commentary when taken to cartoonish extremes (think price gouging, profiteering, exploiting markets, Enron, tie-ins with presidents). *Big Oil* isn't that game. It's a simplistic *Railroad Tycoon* clone that seems to work on the assumption that making pipelines is as interesting as laying track. It isn't, for reasons that become obvious once you've plopped a few down on its empty 3D landscapes. (You don't have to worry about trains being able to pass a track; oil flows freely.) It isn't terrible, but there aren't enough fiddly bits to keep it engaging. It's an overly straightforward and dull simulation with enough downtime for you to ponder the greater fun you'll probably be having playing *Railroads!* in a couple of months. **–Steve Bauman**

Victoria: Revolutions

Paradox/Everyone

★★½



This $10 superpatch adds and subtracts from the original *Victoria*. It tacks another decade onto the end of the original, and the colonization system has been rewritten to slow down the rate of European imperialism. To prevent players from building perfect luxury economies, governments now have limits on when they can build factories and railroads. Armies have been cut down, too. A lot of little fixes have appeared here and there, but they do little to make *Victoria* more transparent to baffled users. This is more a sop to the converted than an effort to appeal to those who have given up. **–Troy S. Goodfellow**

revisionist history

By Steve Bauman

The Adventure Games of Sierra

Nostalgia is a beautiful thing. Sierra has unleashed individual collections of its most popular adventure game series of the 1980s and early '90s. These aren't lavish packages; each includes a CD—two for *King's Quest*—and a single sheet of paper. All the games appear in their full DOS glory, with a custom version of the DOSBox utility to help get the sound and graphics up to speed under Windows XP.

Once you load one of these games, you see the other side of nostalgia. Time hasn't been so kind to them, by contrast with the LucasArts adventures of the same period. It's not a graphics thing; you accept that they look kind of rough. (To put it kindly, on a big LCD, you're in "yikes" territory.) It's the designs that are a problem. Sierra, unlike LucasArts, seems to have worked on the assumption that repeatedly killing off the player was a solid design principle rather than a frustrating experience, since most were "Hah, gotcha!" moments. It's easy to kill off players; just drop random rocks on their heads. It's much harder to lead them through a game with subtle hints and still provide them with a challenge. Sierra's games constantly threw near-impenetrable barriers at you, requiring brute-force trial and error to advance rather than rewarding logic or brains. They were designed to get you to buy hint books or call Sierra's expensive hint line.

Still, each package delivers a lot of old-school gaming for $20. The comedic *Space Quest* series, for example, is represented by six different games. Though the humor is uneven, it's probably the most universally loved series from Sierra, and for good reason—these are solid, well-designed games. The original *Space Quest* is its VGA remake, but the second and third versions are represented in all of their 16-color EGA glory, with the original "Verb Noun" text interface. The lower-color versions actually look better than their 256-color counterparts.

Leisure Suit Larry hardly needs an introduction. Its collection includes five games, but no *Love for Sail* (that probably would have entailed adding another CD). Though the series got progressively broader, one thing is certain: You either love Al Lowe's below the Borscht Belt humor or you don't. And, despite its strong adult content, there's always been a certain sweetness behind *Larry*. All of the game's cruelty and misanthropy were directed at Larry; you laughed at him, not with him. He always "got it" in the end, and not in a good, sexy way.

The four *Police Quest* games, with their obsessive focus on protocol—don't forget to check your gun before you enter the jail—hold up pretty well, though the last one with its "digitized characters" (which seemed so cool in 1993) looks even worse than its more simplistic predecessors. (The attempts at graphical "realism" at low resolutions make the screen look like clown vomit.) It's too bad the game designers went heavy on the melodrama; as the success of shows like *Law & Order* and *CSI* shows, procedure with minimal characterization is entertaining on its own.

The crown jewel of these releases is *King's Quest*, which has a whopping seven titles. Design-wise, it's aged poorly. Playing through each game is a chore. The storylines are simplistic, and the puzzles are punishing and obtuse. They certainly received the most attention, but it's hard to remember why. The other games were significantly better.

These collections leave you with the realization that Sierra's games were undeniably groundbreaking, as well as being highly flawed, somewhat crude, and generally clichéd and clunky. Still, Sierra was going places no one else had even considered going. Though its designers may have fumbled and stumbled their way through this early period, their games provided the models and templates for the superior ones—from Sierra and other companies—that followed. ■

FORD STREET RACING

Budget entertainment for a budget price.

RATING ★★★ **GENRE** Car Ad **DEVELOPER** Razorworks **PUBLISHER** Eidos **ESRB** Everyone **REQUIREMENTS** 800MHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Racing games are good for wasting a few hours. You usually navigate through some menus, and then you're on the track competing. When the mood strikes, you don't want anything fancy—no wrenches to turn, no numbers to crunch to make the car perform. You just want to turn left and right while going fast. *Ford Street Racing* is made to fill this time.

Licensed by the Ford Motor Company, it includes many famous street cars that have emerged from the factories of this long-time U.S. automaker. It's an arcade game with short three- or four-lap races, cars that slam into poles and keep on going, and mild catch-up logic that makes it impossible for you to ever truly be safe in front of a race. You win a lot of races, easily at times, but the specter of a contested finish is always there.

The game features solo and team races, with a unique twist on teams. You're able to control any of the team cars by simply hitting a button to switch to another car mid-race. This allows you to draft, block, and play tactics during the event. These team races are arcade-style silly, but at least they break up the monotony that comes from racing on city streets. Non-race challenges earn you more funds to buy new cars. They also offer that little bit of extra variety to this decent budget game.

It won't hold your attention for very long, but *Ford Street Racing* is competent enough to get you through a couple of rainy days. You'll probably want to buy a Ford when you're done, too. **–David J. Long**

This Mustang is a dream ride of American muscle for many.

TERRAWARS: NY INVASION

Let the sucking commence

RATING ★ **GENRE** Future Crap **DEVELOPER** Ladyluck Digital Media **PUBLISHER** TriSynergy **REQUIREMENTS** 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM; No taste **ESRB** Teen

There are times when a bad game can be a blast. "The Attack of the Killer Frogs" opening to *Daikatana*, for example. All of *Hard Truck: Apocalypse*. The cheesy adolescent comic book fantasies of *Sin Episodes*. But playing *TerraWars: NY Invasion* is just depressing. If you can suffer through to its conclusion, you're truly a brave person. Or desperate, because we're talking about a game whose most redeeming quality is that it doesn't format your hard drive when uninstalled.

The world has been overrun by an alien invasion! You're a medical student with the National Guard! Your team is dead! You must save the world! It isn't the worst setup in the world, only the most generic one.

The gameplay is where the suck really appears, and it's bad right from the get-go. The endless and repetitive combat is dreadful. The game vomits wave after wave of poorly animated creatures with bizarre AI at you. They exhibit the typical dodging moves of a Monolith game (it's built with the LithTech engine circa 2002 or so), although they have this weird speed-up problem with their pathing that makes them move at quadruple speed half the time.

Don't get too excited about fighting something; it just sits there.

This less-than-stellar combat takes place in flat expanses of nothingness that vaguely resemble something not entirely unlike a city. These environments all seem like first passes, as if the guy who was supposed to add the interesting bits disappeared during the game's development and was never replaced. At least the voice acting is noteworthy. It's the best part of the game. It's all heavily accented non-actors—presumably from the developer's native Philippines—trying to do American accents, and it's so bad it's almost worth the price of admission.

Almost. *TerraWars* has multiplayer—co-op, even—but, over the course of a month's worth of desperately hoping to see an available game, none ever appeared in the browser. It's as if everyone is embarrassed to start one, because doing so would show the world that they've purchased the worst game of 2006. **–Steve Bauman**

YOUR OTHER SYSTEMS BY TOM CHICK

They're the latest in open-world games, but they're polar opposites. **Yakuza** (Sega/Mature/PlayStation 2) is as story-driven as **Saints Row** (THQ/Mature/360) is free-form. *Yakuza* is as ugly and low-tech as *Saints Row* is flashy and next-gen. *Yakuza* is as Japanese as *Saints Row* is American. But they're both playground worlds, built for you to run loose in and do as you will.

Yakuza is the weaker of the two, and not just because it's a PlayStation 2 game. It relies heavily and often on superficial *Virtua Fighter* fighting; "old school" would be the polite way to put it. You "Virtua Fight" random encounters, bosses, sub-bosses, arena battles, ad nauseum. You have to slog through a thousand melees to advance your character. There's also a lot of padding in the form of sub-quests and minigames, including an absurd hostess-wooing minigame.

There's a strong story, but the narrative isn't strong enough to make up for the gameplay. *Yakuza* doesn't bear up under all the inconsequential frittering and pressing of triangle to kick or square to punch. Which is a shame, because so few games even bother trying to tell a story, much less one this good.

[clockwise from top] Yakuza, Pokémon Mystery Dungeons, Cooking Mama, Saints Row

Saints Row, by contrast, has a ridiculous "our gang takes over the city" story. To be fair, it's not a story so much as a mission progression, there for you to advance intermittently once you've stored up enough "respect." The gameplay is shrewdly paced to reward goofing around, by giving you about a dozen different kinds of sideline missions that you can pursue as you like. Each is distinct, and most are really well done.

Saints Row really shines when it comes to technology. The city looks great, the vehicles and guns handle much better than their Rockstar counterparts, and the customization for your cars, character, and even your soundtrack creates a much stronger sense of attachment than *San Andreas* did with its pretensions toward a stat-based RPG progression. If you like this kind of game, *Saints Row* is one of the many recent must-haves for the 360.

On the handheld front, the PSP gets a couple of nearly indistinguishable action RPGs. Namco's **Bounty Hounds** and Konami's **Rengoku II** are both about running around in nondescript levels, beating up robot monsters and finding loot. In *Rengoku*, you're a robot, so your weapons turn you into a weird-looking character with, say, a drill or a gun for a head and swords for hands. In *Bounty Hounds*, you're just a generic heavily-armed adventurer. They're both satisfying enough and well-suited for the PSP, with *Rengoku II* being slightly more manageable and offering a more flexible combat system.

But the best recent handheld dungeon crawler is **Pokémon Mystery Dungeons** for the DS. You've got to power through some silly cutscenes and insufferably cute creatures with stupid names, but what you get for your trouble is a *Nethack*-style dungeon crawl with random maps, built entirely to satisfy your leveling jones. Instead of collecting loot or leveling up a character, *Mystery Dungeons* is all about party management and collecting and advancing Pokémons. *Pokémon* might be for kids, but *Mystery Dungeons* is for *Nethack* fans.

Finally, when it comes to games you're embarrassed to love, *Mystery Dungeons* is the least of your problems. **Cooking Mama** for the DS is a collection of cooking-themed minigames, linked together into recipes. It's like *Trauma Center*, but instead of using your stylus to cut people open and fry tumors, you're using it to cut onions open and fry dumplings. When you successfully cook something, you unlock more recipes to cook more things. It goes nowhere, and that's kind of the point—it's got all the crafting of an MMO, with none of the economy. Your only goal is to please Cooking Mama, a cute little anime chick who watches over you with eyes that shine with insane pride when you peel the hot potatoes in time or shoot flames of rage when you don't add the eggs fast enough. It's weird, memorable, and perfect for short bursts of mindless activity. In other words, it's the perfect handheld game. ■

Video on a Budget

Feeling like you can't keep up with the digital Joneses and afraid of a $500 videocard-related credit card bill? Consider these nine cards that won't kill your wallet

BY PAUL JASTRZEBSKI

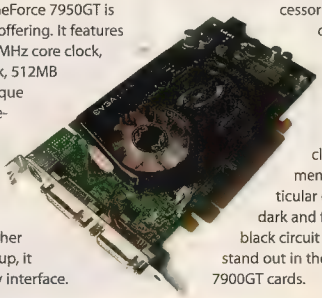
The videocard is the most important—and often the most expensive—component in a gaming system. Having the fastest processor, huge amounts of memory, and fast hard drives is great and all, but the videocard is almost always the limiting factor in games. If it isn't fast enough, your game will be choppy and less entertaining. So the interest in videocards has never been higher, and modern cards (and games) are pushing more pixels and adding more graphical enhancements than ever before.

With only two graphic processing unit (GPU) manufacturers, you'd think that selecting the perfect GPU for a particular gaming budget would be easy. That couldn't be more wrong. If you look at NVIDIA's and ATI's current offerings, you'll see that both have flooded the market with cards that have different clock speeds and memory types, while often only differing by $20-$30. Also, with the prominence of NVIDIA's SLI and ATI's Crossfire dual-card options, gamers now have to decide whether two $150 graphics cards would be a better investment than a single $300 one.

The useful videocards start at around $125, and we've capped the upper limit at $300, making this a round-up of cards most people can probably afford. After this head-to-head showdown, one will emerge victorious.

The Contenders: NVIDIA

EVGA GeForce 7950GT Starting off at the high end, EVGA's GeForce 7950GT is NVIDIA's current $299 offering. It features 24 pixel pipelines, 560MHz core clock, 1.45GHz memory clock, 512MB GDDR3 memory, a unique copper heatsink fan design, lifetime warranty, and a full version of *Hitman: Blood Money*. Like every other card priced at $199 and higher featured in our round-up, it uses a 256-bit memory interface.



XFX GeForce 7900GT This is the predecessor to the 7950GT and is only $50 cheaper. It also features 24 pixel pipelines but has 256MB of GDDR3 memory, a 470MHz core clock, and a 1370MHz memory clock. This particular card glows in the dark and features a very cool black circuit board, making it stand out in the sea of other 7900GT cards.

XFX GeForce 7900GS Sliding down another $50, we find the $199 GeForce 7900GS, already a huge hit in the market and the cheapest card in the round-up using a 256-bit memory interface. The card is equipped with 20 pixel pipelines, a 450MHz core clock, a 1320MHz memory clock, and 256MB of GDDR3 memory.

Gigabyte GeForce 7600GT This is NVIDIA's "mainstream performance GPU," meaning that it's at the maximum price point for casual gamers to consider. Because it is a "mainstream" part, the 7600GT, like the other GeForce 7600 cards, uses a 128-bit memory interface, coupled with a 560MHz core and 1440MHz memory clock. This model includes a full version of *Civilization IV* and has a wholly passive, albeit rather large, heatsink. It's completely silent.

ASUS GeForce 7600GS And now the confusion begins. The ASUS GeForce 7600GS is priced at $15 less than the 7600GT and is also passively cooled. However, instead of opting for higher core and memory-clock frequency, ASUS doubled the card's onboard memory to 512MB, leaving the core clock frequency at 400MHz, while the memory clock dropped to 1080MHz.

Videocardology

Impress friends and relatives with your knowledge of arcane videocard terminology

Pixel Pipelines These are essentially the "roads inside your GPU that facilitate the transfer of information for processing. The more your GPU has, the more data you can process at any given time and the faster your GPU is.

Core Clock Frequency This is the actual speed of your GPU. The higher the speed, the faster the GPU can render the pixel information going through its pixel pipelines.

Memory Clock Frequency This is the speed of your card's memory. It converts the digital pixel data from the GPU into signals that can be displayed on your monitor. The faster the memory, the faster this conversion.

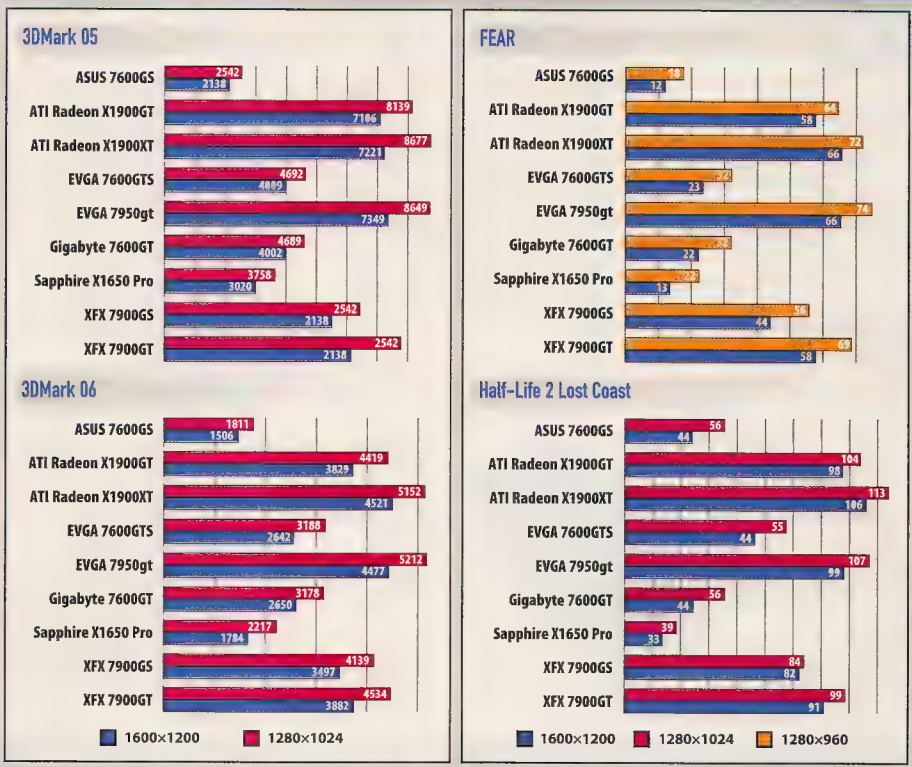
Memory Interface The memory interface (either 256-bit or 128-bit) is multiplied by the memory clock frequency to give you the maximum theoretical memory throughput (bandwidth) of your GPU.

The Death of DirectX 9

With the marketing and media blitz surrounding Windows Vista's January 2007 launch, many have speculated that DirectX 9 graphics cards are now obsolete, and that the upcoming generation of DirectX 10–based cards from NVIDIA and ATI is the one we should all be waiting for.

In reality, DirectX 10 will only be for Vista, and while it will add a great number of useful features when cards do come out, waiting for DX10 cards is a waste of time. Every mainstream game that will come out for Vista in the next year and a half will have a DX9 render path, making your current card—or the one you're about to buy—an investment that will still be useful for its (typical) 2-3-year lifecycle.

BENCHMARKS

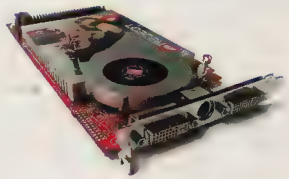


Testing with NVIDIA cards used an ASUS motherboard with the latest nForce 590 SLI chipset. ATI cards were tested with the ASUS M2R32-MVP Radeon Xpress 3200 motherboard. An AMD Athlon 64 4200+ AM2 CPU with 2GB of Kingston HyperX DDR2 memory was used for all tests.

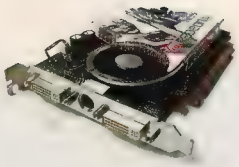
EVGA GeForce 7600GTS The interesting thing about this card is that NVIDIA has never released a "GTS" model; the 256MB EVGA GeForce 7600GTS is a highly overclocked GeForce 7600GS, with a core clock of 560MHz and memory clock of 1440MHz, the precise clock speeds of the Gigabyte GeForce 7600GT. Still, it's priced $25 cheaper at $125.

The Contenders: ATI

ATI Radeon X1900XT 256MB This older card is now priced at $249 and is competing directly with the GeForce 7900GT. ATI's GPU architecture currently differs from NVIDIA's in that each pixel pipeline within the X1900 GPU has three shader processors, compared with NVIDIA's one per pipeline. So, with a 16-pixel-pipeline design, the Radeon X1900 series effectively features 48 shader processors. More shader processors per pipeline help render games with long pixel shader instructions more efficiently. Since PC games are being made with ever more complex shaders, this approach will likely be beneficial for many years down the road.



ATI Radeon X1900GT To compete directly with the 7900GS, ATI recently dropped the price of the X1900GT to $199. It effectively uses the same graphics core as the X1900XT, with a core clocked a little slower at 575MHz, memory clocked at 1200MHz, and single-slot cooling design.



Sapphire Radeon X1650 Pro As of press time, this is the only ATI-based card priced between $125 and $199. It has a 12-pixel-pipeline part with a 600MHz core clock, 1400MHz memory clock, and 256MB of memory.

The Results

After testing every card in *3DMark 05* and *06*, *Half Life 2: Lost Coast*, and *F.E.A.R*, the first thing that jumps out is the great value of both the ATI Radeon X1900XT 256MB and Radeon X1900GT now that they've dropped in price. Both simply outperform the GeForce 7900GT and GeForce 7900GS across the board. The GeForce 7950GT stood alone as the performance champion, because at press time, ATI no longer had a comparable $299 offering.

Looking at the more mainstream cards, the 7600GTS offers the most value for your dollar, as it's $25 cheaper than the 7600GT, while offering almost the same amount of performance in single-card tests. For those on a very tight budget, it's a terrific card that can still keep up with *Half-Life 2* and *F.E.A.R* as long as anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering are turned off.

The 7600GS was a big disappointment: The card's lower clock and memory speeds hindered its performance throughout our testing suite. The extra 256MB of memory the card has on the EVGA and Gigabyte offerings does nothing to improve performance in any of our tests. Although ATI was successful in the $249-$199 range, its Radeon X1650 Pro cards simply don't have enough horsepower to keep up with the GeForce 7600–based cards currently on the market.

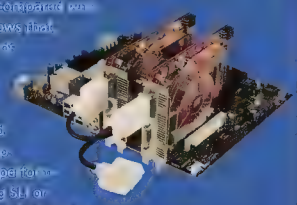
So which card should you go out and buy? Although performance tests show that the Radeon X1900GT and the GeForce 7600GTS give tremendous performance at their given price points, other factors like good bundle, cooling solution, and availability always come into play. So long as you don't buy a card based solely on its amount of onboard memory, you won't go wrong with any of these cards. ■

Is Two Better Than One?

To SLI or not to SLI (or Crossfire), that is the question.

So, how do two lower-cost cards perform compared with their more expensive brothers? Testing shows that, for the most part, two GeForce 7600GT cards deliver nearly the same performance as one 7950GT. At the same time, two GeForce 7600GTS cards give you the performance you'd expect from a 7900GT. And two X1650s fill a gap in ATI's current line-up.

Overall, you typically see an increase in performance of between 60% and 85% when using SLI or Crossfire compared with single-card setups, depending on which games you're playing. So, if you're looking to save money today, buying a second card down the road can give you a nice performance boost.



BENCHMARKS

Radeon X1650 Pro Crossfire		GeForce 7600GT SLI		GeForce 7600GTS SLI	
3DMark05		**3DMark05**		**3DMark05**	
1280×1024	6959	1280×1024	8632	1280×1024	8211
1600×1200	5804	1600×1200	7480	1600×1200	6997
3DMark06		**3DMark06**		**3DMark06**	
1280×1024	3985	1280×1024	5458	1280×1024	5325
1600×1200	3204	1600×1200	4104	1600×1200	3859
F.E.A.R.		**F.E.A.R.**		**F.E.A.R.**	
1280×960	37	1280×960	73	1280×960	67
1600×1200	21	1600×1200	62	1600×1200	57
Half-Life 2		**Half-Life 2**		**Half-Life 2**	
1280×1024	60	1280×1024	76	1280×1024	69
1600×1200	54	1600×1200	73	1600×1200	66

VALUE

If you divide the results from 3DMark06 by the price, you get an idea of what you're spending for performance. The 7600GTS is the value champion, though it isn't close to being a top performer.

	3DMarks/Dollar		3DMarks/Dollar
7600GTS	25.5	X1900GT	17.7
7600GTS SLI	21.4	7950GT	17.4
7600GT	21.3	X1650 Pro	17.1
7900GS	20.8	X1900XT	17.2
7600GT SLI	18.3	X1650 Pro Crossfire	15.3
7900GT	18.2	7600GS	13.4

Toxicity

Biohazard's **Annihilation** is a well-built, high-end custom PC for those with money to burn

RATING ★★★★ **MANUFACTURER** Biohazard Computer Systems **MSRP** $5754

High-end, custom-built PCs aren't exactly the most rational purchases, as you end up spending a whole lot more money than you would for a similarly performing Dell or Gateway system. What they give you is additional customization and, perhaps more importantly, some exclusivity. Sure, everyone has an Alienware system, right? But how many people do you know have a stylish, flat black one with a giant biohazard symbol on the case door? (You might not want to take this one through customs or on a plane.)

Biohazard builds Pentium and AMD systems, and one of its lower-cost models is the Annihilation. "Lower cost" in this case is a relative term, because this thing is over five grand. The extra cash gets you superior build quality, an extremely neat interior, and some options you'd expect from more home-brewed systems, like switches for the interior lights. The system also features S.H.O.C., which stands for Stable Hyper Overclock. From the factory, the Athlon FX-62 included in this system was overclocked by 10%, and the GeForce 7950 GX2 was given a similar percentage boost at the BIOS level, not just through software. The main advantage of factory overclocking is that Biohazard has gone through the tedious testing to determine the optimal stable speed. (It's also still under warranty.)

Needless to say, this is an extremely fast system. In some tests, it's as fast as the $7000 Voodoo PC system tested last month, or faster; in others, it comes in below the $4000 Gateway. The different results are due to its videocard and processor. A stock 7950 GX2 is ridiculously fast, and overclocking makes it, er, faster. In games that just push video, it's off the charts fast. In more CPU-intensive tests, it's outclassed by systems with the faster Intel Core 2 Duo Extreme processor.

If you think the price is absurd, well, you're right. You can build an equivalent system for a lot less money, or buy cheaper alternatives that deliver equal or greater performance. But this isn't a machine for the frugal purchaser; it's for someone who arguably has more money than sense. For that person, there's still something here worth paying extra for: the exclusivity, the style, the build quality, and the ability to call someone up and say, "This is what I want. Build it for me today." **–Steve Bauman**

The Specs 2.8GHz Athlon FX-62 overclocked to 3.02GHz; 2GB PC8000 OCZ DDR2 RAM; 1GB GeForce 7950 GX2 videocard (also overclocked); 2 74GB 10,000RPM Western Digital Raptor SATA drives in RAID0, plus a second 300GB 7200RPM Maxtor SATA drive; 16X DVD burner; 8 USB 2.0 ports; 1000W PC Power & Cooling Power Supply; Ageia PhysX physics card

BENCHMARKS

PCMark05	
System	**n/a***
CPU	**6037**
Memory	**6767**
Hard Drive	**n/a***

3DMark 05	No AA/AF	4× AA/8× AF
1024×768	**14654**	**13607**
1280×1024	**13835**	**12281**
1600×1200	**12847**	**10800**
1920×1200	**12165**	**9949**

3DMark 06	No AA/AF	4× AA/8× AF
1024×768	**10059**	**n/a****
1280×1024	**9038**	**n/a**
1600×1200	**7901**	**n/a**
1920×1200	**7337**	**n/a**

F.E.A.R.	No AA/AF	4× AA/8× AF
1024×768	**145**	**129**
1600×1200	**121**	**83**

*PCMark05 experienced problems with the disk tests. These may be due to its being an older benchmark and the system's utilizing two extremely fast 10,000RPM hard drives in a RAID0; they're too fast for the benchmark. **Nvidia cards can't do anti-aliasing and HDR lighting in this benchmark.

[head$h0t] Controller

Fanatec/$99 ★ ★ ★ ★

If you can get past the 1337 name, this is a k001 gaming controller. It's a package deal, featuring the "head$h0t" mouse, "aURa" mousepad, and "emul8or" software that makes it "emul8" a joystick. An illuminated arch with software-adjustable colors and an optional strobe effect—blingy features shared with the mouse—keeps the cable out of your way, and the entire unit serves as a USB 2.0 hub. One of the more interesting things about the mouse is that you adjust its width. The default size is ideal for people with normal-sized hands, however. It's comfortable enough for day-to-day use, though the lack of side buttons is unfortunate (there are two on the face of the mouse). While the overall package looks dorky, the mouse tracks amazingly smoothly across the mousepad; it feels like there's a cushion of air between them. So, if you want a quick-moving mouse with minimal resistance and lots of glowing and pulsing parts, give this one a serious 100k. **–s+3v3 b4um4n**

Siberia Multi Headset **Icemat/$79.99** ★ ★ ★ ★

Black is the new white for the Siberia Headset. Even if color doesn't matter, sound does. It includes a microphone you can attach to your shirt or monitor, making it possible to eat and Skype. The mic is quite sensitive and works great with VoIP programs. The headphones' "open design" improves DVD and in-game audio positioning, meaning you can really hear those guys sneaking up behind you (unfortunately, so can nearby people). Overall, this is a great headset, and a relative bargain at $80. **–Tiffany Martin**

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: It seems like every PC gets a good review, even the ones that are way too expensive. How is this helpful?
–Tommy Boddicker

A: It's an interesting problem. Almost all gaming PCs you can buy are various degrees of good. The performance differences are mostly related to specific hardware choices you make when buying the thing, and build quality is pretty high across the board. Though some of the decisions are tough (Intel or AMD, NVIDIA or ATI), it's never been easier to pick a PC company that will deliver a quality machine.

As for cost, we're always trying to identify the best values. So, when you're talking about budget videocards or lower-end systems, price is given greater consideration. But when you reach a certain level, you can just throw cost out the window. Either you can afford a $4000 system (and up) or you can't. Like a Ferrari, none of those machines are particularly good values, but you have to admit, they are pretty cool.

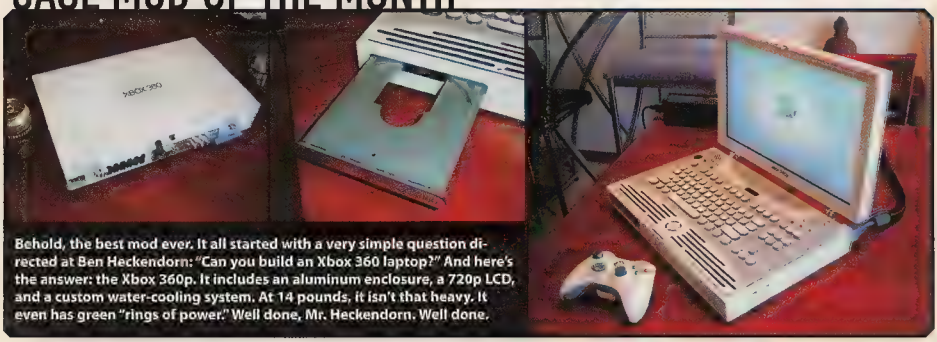
Q: My last three home-built systems had AMD processors. I want to move up to AM2, DDR2, etc., but I'm feeling the lure of Core 2 Duo. Can you convince me not to make the switch?
–Blitzki

A: Short answer: No. Longer answer: It probably doesn't matter. Core 2 Duos are faster than Athlon 64 chips. On price and performance, Core 2 Duo wins. However, that's just taking into account the cost of the processor. Motherboards are an entirely different matter. AM2 motherboards are generally cheaper than Core 2 Duo ones, at least today.

So, if you like AMD systems, stick with AMD and AM2. If you want to go Intel, go for a 975-based motherboard and a Core 2 Duo. And if you're building your own system, shop for motherboards. Pick a vendor you dig—ASUS, Abit, whatever—and figure out which model has the features most important to you for today and tomorrow. SLI? Crossfire? RAID? Passive cooling? Then pick a price and see what fits your budget. Let that be the guide for your choice of CPU.

Send your questions to qa@cgonline.com

CASE MOD OF THE MONTH



Behold, the best mod ever. It all started with a very simple question directed at Ben Heckendorn: "Can you build an Xbox 360 laptop?" And here's the answer: the Xbox 360p. It includes an aluminum enclosure, a 720p LCD, and a custom water-cooling system. At 14 pounds, it isn't that heavy. It even has green "rings of power." Well done, Mr. Heckendorn. Well done.

road to nowhere

by Cindy Yans

Same-o-Quest

You say you want something different, but do you really? And is there such a thing?

After maxing out a few characters in *World of WarCraft*, I immediately leapt to the conclusion that the reason I became bored with it was that its high level "endgame" content was severely lacking. I was really, really, really (that's three reallys) tired of running the same instances week after week. They're beautiful and all, well designed—some spectacularly so. But after a while, the boss mobs began to call us by name, and continued to explode in patently predictable patterns. Sidle left, hotkey five. Sidle right Alt-1, Alt-3. Count to ten, hit Ctrl-B. Long and complex debates about who had the uber-est shoulderpads ensued. And okay… I'm not saying that the whole deal is not partially about long and complex debates about shoulderpads. "Stuff" is good.

I know a bunch of people who double box. This is, they play two characters concurrently on two accounts on two separate machines. (Hang on, there is a connection here). I admit to doing this myself a while back, either for buff-botting, additional healing, or for crafting. With a well-choreographed orchestration of hand movements rivaling a philharmonic conductor's, a seasoned player who understands his or her character classes can multi-task and actually succeed at playing both of them.

"We say we want something different, but with skyrocketing budgets, so many companies don't want to take chances."

The point I'm trying to make is that the MMO genre as we know it, in most circumstances, is so entrenched in its paradigm—its MUD roots, its *EverQuest*-rianism cum *Warcraft*-iansim—that after you master the particular game's basic techniques, it often seems as though you can play it with your eyes closed, as long as you can still "sidle right Alt-1." Or you can play it two characters at a time. Or you can play it while watching baseball. Or you can play two characters at a time while watching baseball and consuming Chinese takeout. With chopsticks.

It's not true in all cases, *EVE Online* being a notable example of something that steps outside the corral. There are a number of others as well. The long-term successful MMOs though—the ones with the high units-sold figures and a continuously solid player base—all have differences that are pretty superficial. You hear developers talk about how unique their new baby is going to be, how it's going to offer this new and different feature, that new concept, or how it's going to allow you to shape your character's nose into 3500 different configurations.

A couple of days prior to this writing, Runestone Game Development declared bankruptcy and closed down its game *Seed* after less than six months of operation. *Seed* dared to be different. There were no expansive environments through which you would travel and discover variously themed zones. Instead, it took place in a colony called simply "Da Vinci" and had a really cool look, a kind of cyberpunk comic book feel. It did away with quests, presenting interactive stories instead (although it's arguable whether "story" and "quest" are interchangeable when both contain an objective). There was no combat, no boss mobs, no experience grind, and no leveling up.

Of course, this was a whole different organism when it came to the perspective of the gamer. It required more creativity. It required cooperation. It required more development capital. Of the dare-to-be-different titles that are still plugging along, *A Tale in the Desert* has a more low maintenance, grass-roots thing going on; *The Sims Online* has Electronic Arts in its backyard; *Second Life* is, well, defying the paradigm altogether stepping into the realm of MySpace and the like.

You have to hand it to *EVE*, though, for pulling off an awfully sophisticated step outside the norm. Its time-based training is a far cry from the level grind, and it boasts over 12,000 players at one time in a non-server-sharded universe. With the other contemporary titles, though, we're still looking at the exact same type of gameplay, in different settings with different styles and degrees of eye-candy. And even in the lineup on the horizon, there's nothing wildly innovative, nothing that seems as though it will challenge the very fabric of the genre.

This partially implies that we're complacent and happy with the fodder we're used to, with a change of scenery adding variety every now and then. While *Warhammer Online* and *Lord of the Rings Online* have some interesting PvP ideas, *Tabula Rasa* is a wild card, completely reinvented with some good-looking action elements. *Vanguard* is Crazy Glued to the "classic style" of gameplay.

Though we still play, we say we want something different, but with skyrocketing budgets, so many companies (unsurprisingly) don't want to take chances. And without skyrocketing budgets, unusual ideas like *Seed* will die on the vine. But we'll continue to roll toon after toon, grind and level, and hey, it's football season. "Hello, Pizza Hut?" ■

MMOCABULARY

Who Gets That Wicked Sword?

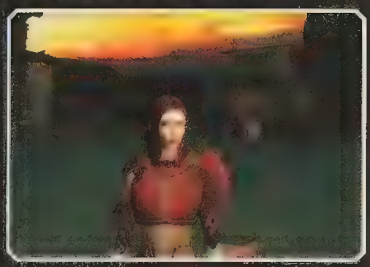
DKP AKA "dragon kill points," this is a system that is considered a "fair" way to distribute significantly high-quality loot among players during raid situations. When players attend guild events or raids, they receive DKP points, which they can then use to "buy" items as they become available. The actual implementation of this sort of system can be straightforward or complex, with points awarded based on total number of hours played, arriving on time and staying till the end, or contributing consumable materials (like potions) to other members on the raid.

Ladder This is another loot distribution system that is often used in lieu of or in addition to the DKP system. In a ladder, raid members are assigned spots in a list based on some initial criteria. When loot drops, the first person on the list has first choice of the item. If he or she declines, the choice passes to the next person, and so on. When a person decides to accept the item, that person generally drops to the bottom of the list. The other players then move up. Ladder systems may be unrestricted or governed by NBG (need before greed), in which players are allowed to claim only those items their class/race can actually use.

POWERLEVEL

Dungeons & Dragons Online Goes Swimmingly

Five things to think about before venturing into the water in Stormreach



1. You can toggle mouselook on and off using the "T" key. This is really, really helpful if you're having trouble swimming underwater. Using mouselook will give you better control.

2. Before swimming, always check your encumbrance level. If it's at "medium," you will have more trouble swimming. Always wait an hour after eating before you swim, and swim naked when possible.

3. That thing you see when you're underwater is a breath meter. It shows how much air you have left before you'll start to drown. If you find yourself about to drown, press the spacebar, or use mouselook mode to move toward the surface.

4. Find and wear magic items that have pluses to Swim. Upping your athletic skill also automatically increases your swimming ability.

5. Don't drown.

MMOBYTES

Games for Yankee Fans—Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling has formed Green Monster Games, a new studio in Boston. Its first title will be an MMO with art direction from Todd McFarlane and creation direction provided by R.A. Salvatore. "We are excited about the future of the industry and even more excited that we will be a part of it, and help shape it for years to come," said Schilling. "We look forward to proving that to every gamer on the planet." Even fans of the Yankees.

Farlan Entertainment, publisher of Dark and Light, has a demo in which players can try out its game engine. The free download allows you to roam around a number of Ganareth locations, snowboard, skydive, and creature watch. You can get it at darkandlight.com/download....

Myth War Online has implemented its "Glorious Guide" system that gives players an incentive to invite friends along. This free-to-play but costly-to-get-cool-stuff game now offers a Glorious Guide ID, and when your friends reach a certain level, you get Honorable Points that can be used to purchase the amazing Saint Beasts. Meanwhile, the friends who register with your ID receive a special newbie pack....

out of the box

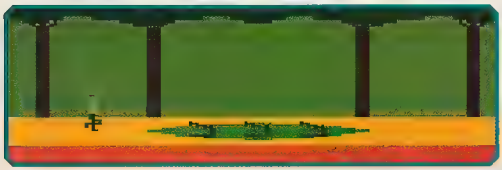
by Brett Todd

The MMO Mod Revolution

Can mods make it in the MMO universe?

Mods may finally be making their way into traditional MMOs. The big buzzword floating around the massively multiplayer community of late is "user-created content," as a number of upcoming games are dropping serious developmental dimes on persuading the mod community to stop worrying and learn to love paying monthly subscription fees.

This is certainly one interesting concept. We'll be crossing a whole new frontier in interactive entertainment if mods for stereotypical MMOs—not sandbox-y ones like *Second Life*—manage to evolve beyond the interface enhancements and tweaks currently available. We'll also be getting back to the glory days of MUDs, when top players routinely became Wizards and got to play Dungeon Master.



"I can't see user-created content fitting into the MMO scene, because there are just too many pitfalls for it to work."

I've become awfully intrigued by what developers have planned. Nevrax's *Ryzom Ring* expansion to *Saga of Ryzom* looks like it could be groundbreaking, with its novel idea of allowing players to jump directly from the standard, developer-maintained world to player-created adventures and quests controlled by player/gamemasters. Still, I don't think the concept will take off, at least not right now. Seeing as I'm not exactly Captain Optimism, hero of the half-full glass, my negative outlook probably doesn't come as much of a surprise. But I simply can't see user-created content fitting into the stereotypical MMO scene, because there are just too many pitfalls for it to work.

My biggest gripe is that we shouldn't be paying $10-15 a month to play games that are being crafted on the fly by fellow players. I've read a lot of online griping from MMO addicts who think that developers like Nevrax and Sigil (currently working on *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*) are trying to pass the buck; that they're only interested in promoting mods so that they can cut back on the expensive tasks of building and maintaining worlds and quests.

I'm not sure I totally buy into this notion. Based on the interviews that I've conducted with MMO developers over the past couple of weeks, there is a lot of legitimate excitement over the design possibilities inherent in letting gamers play God. But I have to admit that I would be reluctant to give my credit card number to a game company that relies on players for content. I would have to see a track record of success in—and dedication to—providing official content in addition to the homebrewed stuff, before I ponied up any cash.

Also, it's hard to see how you can have a consistent world in an MMO where players have the freedom to whip up their own gear and adventures. You could set up a program where developers examine user-created items and quests before approving their going live, but one would expect this to be unwieldy to operate. You can bet that players would constantly complain about rivals with über-equipment, regardless. Imagine how you'd feel if you got killed in a PvP battle by some elf with a pimped-out sword. Or a mage with custom spells the like of which you've never seen before.

Another worry I have concerns MMOs' becoming rat races similar to those in collectible card games. Right now, you at least theoretically get the free run of a game for your monthly subscription fee. Custom content would wreck this, by upping the pressure on players to make or acquire the rare, personalized goodies that top players in the game would be seen carting around. Gold farmers will love the peer pressure that this sort of competition creates; casual players will quickly get sick of keeping up with the Joneses.

Developers can dance around potential problems by pulling a Nevrax and setting up player-created-content zones outside of standard game worlds. This raises the question of whether such a fluid gaming experience will meet the expectations of MMO players. With developers sharing content-creation duties with players, these new zones will almost certainly lack coherent storylines. If the ground is going to shift under your feet, why not save the cash you'd need to spend on a monthly MMO subscription and get into something free, like *Neverwinter Nights* sessions with an online DM?

Still, for years now, many astute MMO developers have been pursuing player-created-content formulas like they were the Holy Grail. So perhaps they've considered the issues discussed here and planned workarounds. I hope that somebody eventually does get mods into MMOs, too, because such a development would decentralize corporate control of the genre. If Blizzard or BioWare pioneers a new MMO design friendly to mods, this could show that players can handle things by themselves. It would begin to shift the focus from cash-producing level grinds back to the pure adventuring that we used to get in MUDs, way back in the day. ■

Arkham Horror Expands: Curse of the Dark Pharaoh/Arkham Horror: Dunwich Horror Expansion

DESIGNERS Robert Vaughn; Kevin Wilson and Richard Launius **PUBLISHER** Fantasy Flight Games
PLAYERS 1–8 **PLAYING TIME** 2–5 Hours **MSRP** $19.95/$39.95

Just like the Fungi from Yuggoth, *Arkham Horror* is growing. The Cthulhu Mythos epic from Fantasy Flight Games has become a franchise over the past few months, with the release of two expansions in the *Curse of the Dark Pharaoh* card pack (★★★★½) and *Dunwich Horror* (★★★★), a full-sized add-on with new maddening horrors from beyond.

Both are must-haves for Lovecraft lovers. *Curse of the Dark Pharaoh* is a 166-card expansion focusing on the arrival of an ancient Egyptian museum exhibit in town. This gives the cards a mummies-and-pyramids vibe, so you encounter mysterious Arab "foreigners" and pull items like the Mask of the Black Pharaoh and the Book of Anubis from the new exhibit deck. It doesn't alter the rules that much, as the new cards can be shuffled into the original decks. Nasty new Mythos cards force you immediately into combat with Great Old Ones like Cthulhu and Shub-Niggurath, though, and there are some nifty tweaks like being barred from Arkham neighborhoods and investigators' being harried or tainted.

It's a different story with *Dunwich Horror*. This quasi-sequel based on Lovecraft's famous short story comes complete with a board representing Wilbur Whateley's old stomping grounds, new investigators and Great Old Ones, over 300 new encounter and item cards, and additional monsters and allies. FFG does a great job here, adding a new doom track that awakens the Dunwich Horror monster when maxed out and new monsters that stalk you.

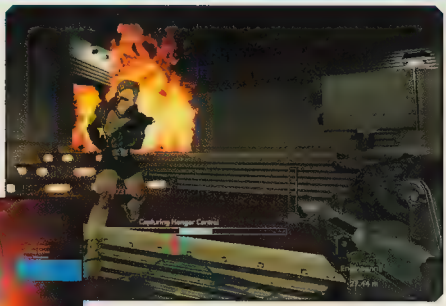
It's almost too much of a good thing, though. The basic game already takes over four hours to play, so added horrors in Dunwich and new rules about madness, injuries, and seal-destroying gate bursts are questionable bonuses.

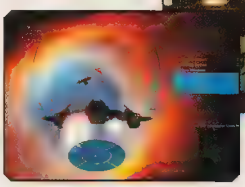
Still, you can't go wrong with either expansion. *Curse of the Dark Pharaoh* is a great way to spruce up the original card decks when everything is getting a bit familiar. And *Dunwich Horror* adds more Lovecraft and more challenge for the three people who find the original game too easy. **–Brett Todd**

SPOTLIGHT: ETERNAL SILENCE 2

Another month, another great Source mod hits the Net. This time out, the spotlight falls on Eternal Silence 2 (eternal-silence.net), an audaciously ambitious multiplayer epic where battles range from deep-space furballs to face-to-face shootouts after boarding enemy capital ships.

Of course, making a mod so far-ranging takes time. The first Eternal Silence was built with *Battlefield 1942* in 2002, but the developers changed their plans after realizing that they wouldn't be able to do everything they had planned with the older engine. They hopped on the Source bandwagon as soon as *Half-Life 2* was announced in 2003.





[above] Capturing hangar control. Or setting it on fire, at any rate. [left] Cranking those boost jets and heading into battle.

The current incarnation of the mod features a detailed storyline about a war in the far future between the United Terran Forces (UTF) and the Neo-Galactic Militia (NGM). As with most first-mod releases, gameplay in the beta is rough and ready. Lag can be an issue, as are crashes. There is just one map available, although it includes both the space and infantry aspects of combat. In the setting of an asteroid field, the UTF attempts to get through enemy defenses and board a capital ship, while the NGM, of course, tries to fend off this attack.

But the mod shows a lot of promise. This map is light on space combat, as it's fairly easy to lean on the boost jets, soar through defenses, and dock with the enemy vessel. Things get harder after you land, though, since the interior of the ship has been set up with readily defensible choke points. Both sides have access to weapons like ion cannons and flamethrowers, so it's a slog on foot.

Eternal Silence is a mod to watch. Its innovative blend of space-sim combat and traditional first-person shooting should make it a huge hit. **–BT**

MODSQUADS

by Brett Todd

One, Two, Three, Four, I Love the Marine Corps

One of the best mods for *Battlefield 2* is getting better. Project Reality is an all-encompassing mod designed to give the game a sort of NATO stamp of approval, with all kinds of gear and vehicle redesigns to make combat situations more realistic. It has been bolstered with the release of the v .032 Map Pack Patch, which offers four new custom maps in EJOD Desert, Mao Valley, Good Station, and Hongshangu Winter. All feature the USMC, but all varieties of terrain are included. So players can enjoy battling it out on the streets of a desert town, in a jungle, in a factory, and on frozen tundra. **realitymod.com**

Super Sub Simming

Although *Silent Hunter III* may be an acquired taste, a lot of people have found the hardcore WWII sub sim to be awfully appetizing. So it shouldn't be too much of a surprise that a gang of them have teamed up to create the Grey Wolves Supermod. This collection of improvements really is pretty super. It weighs in at a hefty 1.2GB and includes hundreds of upgrades and fixes. A lot of the changes are of the niggling variety, but together they add up to a total overhaul of the original game, from the top of the periscope on down. There are some cool touches that can even be appreciated by the non-fanatical, such as the option to escape to Argentina after May 12, 1945, just like Hitler. **users.on.net/~jscones/TGW**

[clockwise from top] Project Reality, Baldur's Gate II Quest Pack, Afraid of Monsters, The Grey Wolves

Are You Afraid of the Dark?

It may be based on the now terminally uncool original *Half-Life* engine, but Afraid of Monsters remains one of the most striking mods out there for survival-horror fans. Unlike its zombie- and ghoul-strewn brethren, this total conversion from ruMple deals with an addict named David Leatherhoff who is fighting either real monsters or nightmares creating by his jonesing for a mysterious new form of painkiller. Yep, we're into *Requiem for a Dream* territory here, folks. The gameplay itself is hit or miss, with levels that cross the line separating "spooky" from "I can't see a goddamn thing" and a frustrating beginning where you have to take on beasties armed only with a combat knife. Still, this is an appropriately unsettling way to spend an autumn evening as the shadows lengthen. **afraidofmonsters.moddb.com**

The Road Goes Ever On

If there is any game released in the past 10 years that doesn't need to be longer, it's *Baldur's Gate II*. But that hasn't stopped SimDing0 and pals. The Baldur's Gate II Quest Pack adds encounters and refines existing adventures all over gloomy Amn and the rest of the Sword Coast. Like a lot of other content mods, this one is primarily aimed at old fans who want a little variety when they sit down to defeat Jon Irenicus yet another time. So the designers have taken a subtle approach and made changes like enhancing monster AI when it comes to targeting foes and using potions, throwing in some extra encounter options at the end of familiar quests, and offering alternative plots with the Harper and Shadow Thief quests. **pocketplane.net/quest**

Alt.Games

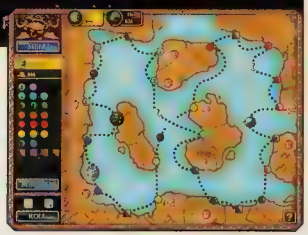
By Troy S. Goodfellow

Kudos Positech Games

If you find *The Sims* too frantic, or too focused on the mundane part of life, this might be the light sim that you're looking for. You start as a low-income Brit slacker with no skills and few prospects. Your score is based on how well you can maintain and expand your friends and contacts while bettering your own life and maybe getting out of that dead-end job washing dishes. A limited number of options and a narrower focus keep it from comparing favorably with the Maxis juggernaut. It does, however, have an interesting look and is a nice reminder of the days when the choice between cleaning your house and hanging out with friends wasn't an easy call. **positech.co.uk/kudos**

Sea Bounty Alawar

Since we already have *Monopoly* games for every major American city, why not a buy-and-rent game based on the Spanish Main? The classic light boardgame is made even lighter here, with four different boards and the option of having multiple human and computer players. The boards are colorful, the background music is relaxing, and there is even a jail. The big difference between this game and the Milton-Bradley classic is that you're limited in what you can build by a fixed pool of buildings (ships, in this case). So you can't just fill the board with rent-raising enterprises. Bonus points for the family-friendly pirate theme and the simple fact that everyone already knows the rules. **alawar.com/games/sea-bounty**



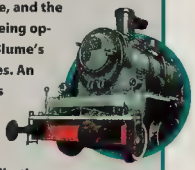
[top] Kudos [above] Sea Bounty

Dwarf Fortress Bay12 Games

Though probably not the first city-builder, *rogue*-like, *Dwarf Fortress* is the first to have such strong word-of-mouth marketing. You start with a handful of Dwarves by a cliff and end with a fortress city full of short and grumpy miners, blacksmiths, and soldiers. Neighboring Kobolds and Goblins might drop by to stir up trouble, but that's why you have the gate (and the soldiers). Even veterans of these *Rogue*-mimicking games will need some time to get used to the cumbersome text interface, but it's worth sticking it out. This is a very clever idea done in a very clever manner. Once you get that first fortress standing, prepare to lose hours to hewing new rooms out of rock. **bay12games.com/dwarves**

MODBLURBS

Anyone who's waiting for the boardgame takes on Age of Empires III and Sid Meier's Pirates! might want to get comfortable and maybe pick up a magazine. Eagle Games, which had promised to publish both games in the last quarter of 2006, ceased operations over the summer due to financial issues. Intellectual property and assets were sold at an August auction to online retailer Funagain Games. Some assets were acquired by former Eagle employee/investor Keith Blume, and the company is now being operated as part of Blume's Phoenix Lab Games. An affiliation deal has been signed between Phoenix and the Funagain Games retail-distribution network, and both the Eagle website and online store are still up and running....



If you're looking for hockey mods now that the puck has been dropped on another NHL season, head over to the Double Minor Hockey Network (doubleminor.net). This great website is the home of hockey modding on the net, with a thriving community of users and a great selection of mods, ranging from face packs for NHL 07 to roster overhauls for NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2007....

If you're looking for an offbeat Neverwinter Nights module, check out thegeorge's surreal Wake. The creepy atmosphere and dark, doomy visuals are reminiscent of a Vertigo comic crossed with a Silent Hill game....

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applied game theory BY HENRY JENKINS AND KURT SQUIRE

Convergence

It's both a floor wax and a dessert topping

"It's floor wax!"

"It's a dessert topping!"

"Hey, hey, hey, calm down, you two. New Shimmer is both a floor wax and a dessert topping!"

Remember the 1970s classic "Saturday Night Live" commercial parody of "two products in one"? It serves as an excellent commentary on convergence run wild, the unholy and ill-considered combination of multiple functions in the same device. Examples include the oven with a built-in television, so housewives can watch cooking shows; the floating car (which survives today only as part of the Duck Tours given in major cities); and perhaps the "smart phone," the digital equivalent of the Swiss Army knife, which crams every possible media appliance into the same device.

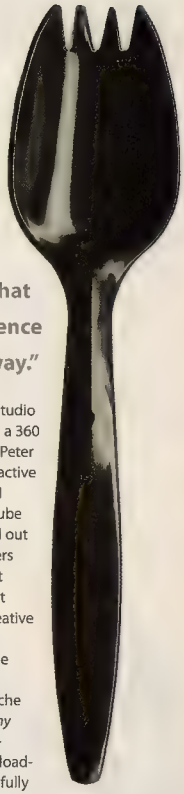
In his new book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, now available at bookstores near you (shameless plug), Henry distinguishes between this tech-heavy notion of convergence (what he calls the "black box fallacy") and a more cultural conception. Some describe convergence as the combination of all media functions into the same black box, but we need to remember that media platforms are constantly evolving. It's not clear that total convergence is useful anyway.

But, if by convergence we mean that every image, sound, experience, brand, and relationship will flow through every available media channel, then we already live in convergence culture. It's being fueled from the top down by media conglomerates seeking to tap their holdings and from the bottom up by teenagers demanding media where and when they want it (through all means, legal and otherwise). It is the meeting of these two forces—corporate and grassroots forms of convergence—that is reshaping contemporary culture.

To see the distinction between technological and cultural convergence, take the Xbox 360. Microsoft is pitching it as the ultimate black box: "Music, movies, pictures, streaming video: Turn Xbox 360 into a mind-blowing multimedia centerpiece by pairing it with a PC with *Windows XP Media Center Edition*." Microsoft is one of the few companies that could make a product combining these media functions, and a Microsoft executive may be the only person who wants them to run on the same platform. Clearly, putting all of these functions into the same device could broaden the market for the 360 beyond hardcore gamers. But playing your downloaded MP3s through your stereo or TV still requires a dedication to home AV that your grandmother may not have. And consumers don't necessarily trust the "evil empire" based in Redmond to make decisions about their entertainment experiences.

What's more exciting about the 360, however, is the cultural convergence: the intersection of corporate-produced and grassroots media. Microsoft made headlines late this summer by announcing XNA Game Studio Express, a suite of simple, low-cost game tools and a distribution platform that will allow amateurs to design, build, and circulate their own games. Initially, you need to have XNA Game Studio Express software to compile and play the games on a 360 (no such limitation exists for Windows versions). As Peter Moore, Microsoft's corporate vice president of interactive entertainment, explained, "Ultimately, long term… I think that there's the ability here to create the YouTube of games." The console companies have long locked out amateur, student, and independent game developers from producing content for their platforms. Without question, the other platforms will have to follow suit quickly to maintain the allegiances of their most creative and curious consumers.

"It's not clear that total convergence is useful anyway."



Moreover, Microsoft appears to be embracing the grassroots forms of media convergence. Xbox Live prominently features content from amateur and niche content providers (the *Red Vs. Blue* people, the *Penny Arcade* folks). A micropayment system enables consumers to pay money up front and purchase downloadable commercial, semicommercial, and sometimes fully amateur content. Small and independent game producers (think GameLab) might sell directly to consumers and turn a profit by avoiding traditional retailers.

Speaking recently in public, Daniel James, the CEO of Three Rings (*YoHoHo! Puzzle Pirates*), suggested that the rise of digital distribution for games may diminish the clout that

major retailers such as Wal-Mart and major publishers like Electronic Arts exert over game publishing. This shift may help the industry by challenging the paradigm of blockbuster games. Amateurs have long designed and developed content for game consoles—illegally—and have distributed it within fan networks underground. But for them to walk through the front door, reach a broader base of consumers, and do so with the assistance of Microsoft's marketers is an extraordinary breakthrough.

Of course, where Microsoft is concerned, one wants to look closely at the Trojan Horse they are installing in our living rooms. That's where the technological and cultural versions of convergence start to collide. We may want to have access to this grassroots content, but we should also be aware of how this accessibility shapes the decisions we have about our home entertainment.

Henry Jenkins and **Kurt Squire** are co-directors of The Education Arcade, which is based at MIT and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. More information on the program can be found at educationarcade.org

random incoherence BY KELLY WAND

The Valentine Effect

"Once made equal to man, woman becomes his superior." —Socrates (470–399 B.C.)

Why do we play games?

It's the type of question one usually only ponders when one's screen freezes, when an ally calls one a "lag-homo," or when the adrenochrome kicks in. Yet the answer to this chin-tappingly ancient query is far more elusive and complex than other columnists would have you believe. Pat rejoinders like "Games are simply meant to ease torpid boredom," or "If there's anything we enjoy more than watching shit blow up, it's making shit blow up by clicking mouse buttons," may satisfy the college professors and Logitech sales reps that compose the mainstream gaming press. But they fail to account for why so many undeniably intelligent people so willingly endure the negative aspects of gaming for such prolonged periods. Games tend to keep us in a hardly ideal perpetual state of 1) waiting, 2) irritation, or 3) both.

We tamely accept the waiting as a given. But when you think about it, games are composed almost entirely of downtime, especially in comparison with other forms of entertainment. Load screens, resource collection, base construction, skill point allocation, mana recharge "breaks," ever-longer sequences of twirling corporate logos, grinding for rep; waiting on groups to form, players to join, matches to start, patches to install. We're obliged to sit through it all again and again, year in and year out, by contrast with our experience of books, songs, and movies that are painstakingly edited to the last word, note, or frame of film. Those moments of tedium in gaming add up, even as they destroy time sense and whittle away at already precarious sleep cycles. Typing "/played" in *World of WarCraft* is the foolhardiest of acts that game permits.

Our tolerance for enduring matching irritation levels is even harder to fathom. On top of the vexation caused by the waiting, add the high-pressure hassles of battle micro, trash talk, one-sided competition, faulty technology, and breaches of justice and the physical discomforts of gamepads, keyboards, office chairs, and monitor glare. There's also that cold, gnawing sense of trauma that inexorably crawls up your spine on the occasions when, even at your most brilliant, you still get your ass handed to you by some bored nine-year-old chimp in Barstow. Only gamers can lose to children.

So why do we put ourselves through these punishing marathon cycles that haunt our dreams, cramp our backs, ruin our eyes, and command so little respect? The answer's been staring us all in the face since the dawn of time, as simple and profound as a rainbow-striped poop. In a nutshell, what drugs were to rock and roll and religion was to literature, women, females, and girls have been to games.

The links are subtle and deceptive at first glance. There's certainly no argument that women enjoy playing games. A website called WomenGamers.com is devoted to fostering this notion: Its logo is "Women *Do* Play" (which itself suggests defiance of an established norm).

"There's also that cold, gnawing sense of trauma that inexorably crawls up your spine on the occasions when, even at your most brilliant, you still get your ass handed to you by some bored nine-year-old chimp in Barstow."

But on the production side, the interactive entertainment industry is overwhelmingly male-driven. Women, at least in Western societies (i.e., everywhere but Japan), occupy an unusual position at game studios. Granted, most of our hierarchies were established by men who now monopolize the upper levels, thus depriving women of their rightful share of opportunities to achieve incompetence. You'll see sharp, capable women of many ethnicities as producers, artists, marketing types, or QA, but hardly ever in what can be considered a technical role. Where are the female Sid Meiers, Warren Spectors, and John Carmacks? Perhaps they're out there, but for every exception that proves the rule, it's obvious that the game industry relies on males to make the games and women to sell them.

One curious factor in this domestic dynamic is that most developer-studio employees are of roughly similar ages. Radical upheavals in society tend to occur in generational cycles (we can only handle one at a time, apparently). To take one notable example, American males went off to fight Hitler, saved the world, came back understandably horny, and pumped out the baby boomers, the generation that then went about screwing up the world for us in as many ways as ecologically and financially possible.

Games are the result of a similar convergence of global social changes: the growth of computer science, the rise of Women's Lib, the commercial ascendance of disposable entertainment, and its relentless obsession with marketing to youth since it's the most profitable demographic (even though "youth" lasts only a few years and adulthood lasts decades). Women, newly liberated and hungry to do more with their lives, became harder to attain for nebbishes. So this thwarted generation of introverted, bookish nerds gave up on trying to score with prima donnas and turned to computers for solace. Their diverted passion and vigor resulted in the creation of personal computers, the videogame as we know it, and of course, the Internet, which transformed the face of porn forever. All of this became wildly popular and profitable, luring the women back.

And now here we are: business parks staffed with 40-year-old virgins wandering hallways cheek by jowl with the very same girls they'd once sought, and these girls having to deal with the same misshapen trolls they'd once so assiduously avoided. Morlocks and Eloi, together again.

In some ways, both sexes benefited. Guys used to have to golf and go to cigar clubs to avoid their wives and girlfriends; games have allowed them the freedom to ignore right from the comfort of their own homes. In some cases, the ladies in question are themselves gamers. Now you can live with 'em *and* shoot 'em! There's less fighting over the remote. It's utopia.

Still, it's an ongoing process, and the long-term effects of being the first Net generation in human history (and therefore the most sedentary one ever) have yet to be studied. Like most koyannaqatsi milestones in the past, it's been a trade-off of extremes. The Net has made millions of people better typists but lazier writers, more informed but less participatory; it's given us all a more leisure-filled youth than our ancestors ever dreamed of, but at the expense of our youth. Never have so much unfiltered retardation, misinformation, and vitriol assaulted human eyes on a daily basis, and that's just the pop-ups.

And where it's all leading is anyone's guess. Human nature radically adapts when technology prods it. Cavemen had no use for formal marriage, for example, until architecture came along; now, thanks to online porn and in vitro fertilization, neither do we. So hooray for us, men and women alike, for finally defeating Nature's cunning biological snares once again! For now.

Next month: Lumines vs. Tetris. Nine color-blind contortionists analyze the differences! In Sanskrit!

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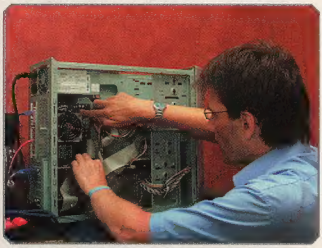
three finger salute BY TOM CHICK

Tinkers' Toys

Thinking inside the box

Mark Allison was a few years older than me. He lived down the street. Sometimes our respective moms drove us to school together. After Mark went off to high school ahead of me, he got a red Trans Am and spent weekend afternoons working on it. There was a picture of a bird on the hood with outstretched wings that looked like something from the Monster Manual. He let me drive it once, but he only did it to impress my girlfriend and lord over me how cool it was. I didn't care. I had a Pinto.

I've never been part of car culture, or even car awareness. When my car breaks down, I take it to the mechanic. I nod wisely as he tells me what's wrong. It doesn't make any difference to me whether it's worn break shoes, a carburader that needs to be rebuilt, or depleted dilithium crystals. I just nod and then write a check for some nontrivial amount.



"Like many of you reading this magazine, I learned about computers because that's what I had to do to play games."

I don't know where Mark Allison is now. But I bet that, when his computer won't work, he probably has to nod wisely while someone explains video drivers or gateway addresses or DirectX versions. Mark Allison probably has a PlayStation 2 and a copy of *Madden*. His computer is probably loaded with spyware, and it may not even have a 3D card. He may only use it to check e-mail and sports scores. Maybe he has no idea how awesome *Company of Heroes* and *World of WarCraft* are. He will probably never have the satisfaction of plunging his arms elbow-deep into a system's guts.

Like many of you reading this magazine, I learned about computers because that's what I had to do to play games. We build our computers for gaming. When they break or do something weird—and they will break and do weird things—we can fix them. Config.sys was our shibboleth. Now it's dxdiag. I can't speak for you, but I have never had a computer problem I couldn't fix. Some take a few minutes, some take entire days, and others might require buying new parts, if not whole new computers ("replacing" is a kind of fixing). But I always fix them.

That's one reason I don't trust console systems. They sit inside their inviolable little cases, tight bundles of inscrutable electronics that I have no sway over. I don't even get to install games on them. Instead, the games live on a shelf and the console lives under the DVD player. They're separate entities. Sometimes I bring them together, putting the disc in the tray so they can spend time with each other. I'm granting them a conjugal visit inside that little impregnable box.

On a PC, my games marry my system. I install them, download no-CD cracks, examine the readme.txt, and maybe even use mods or trainers. I run them at whatever resolution I deem necessary. Maybe I'll disable shadows or anti-aliasing, just because I can. If I wanted, I could use a hex editor to poke around in a saved game file. Unlockables? Pfft.

When a console system breaks, I'm as helpless as I am when my car needs a new beginner or the tires need to be turned. I'm currently on my third Xbox and sixth Xbox 360. Each time they've broken, I've had to wade through a bureaucratic nightmare of Kafka-esque proportions, involving delays, separate departments, half-truths, shipping and repair fees, and refurbished units that arrive already broken. Who wouldn't rather configure autoexec.bat files to allocate memory or update drivers?

I can complain with the best of them about PC games' not working. But when they do work, which is easily 99% of the time, they work on a computer that I built, one I can troubleshoot, and that would probably impress the hell out of whomever Mark Allison married. If she's a gamer. Otherwise, I suppose I could show her a busy area of *The Sims 2* with the detail jacked all the way up. My system can do that.

PC gaming dead? The very fact that we can open it up on the operating table is one of its greatest strengths. Our option to do things like run Linux (I don't even know what that is), replace broken videocards, and set up fancy SCSI hard drive interfaces is a sign that our computers are ours in a way from which consoles, with their proprietary fastidiousness, will always be as aloof as cats. ■

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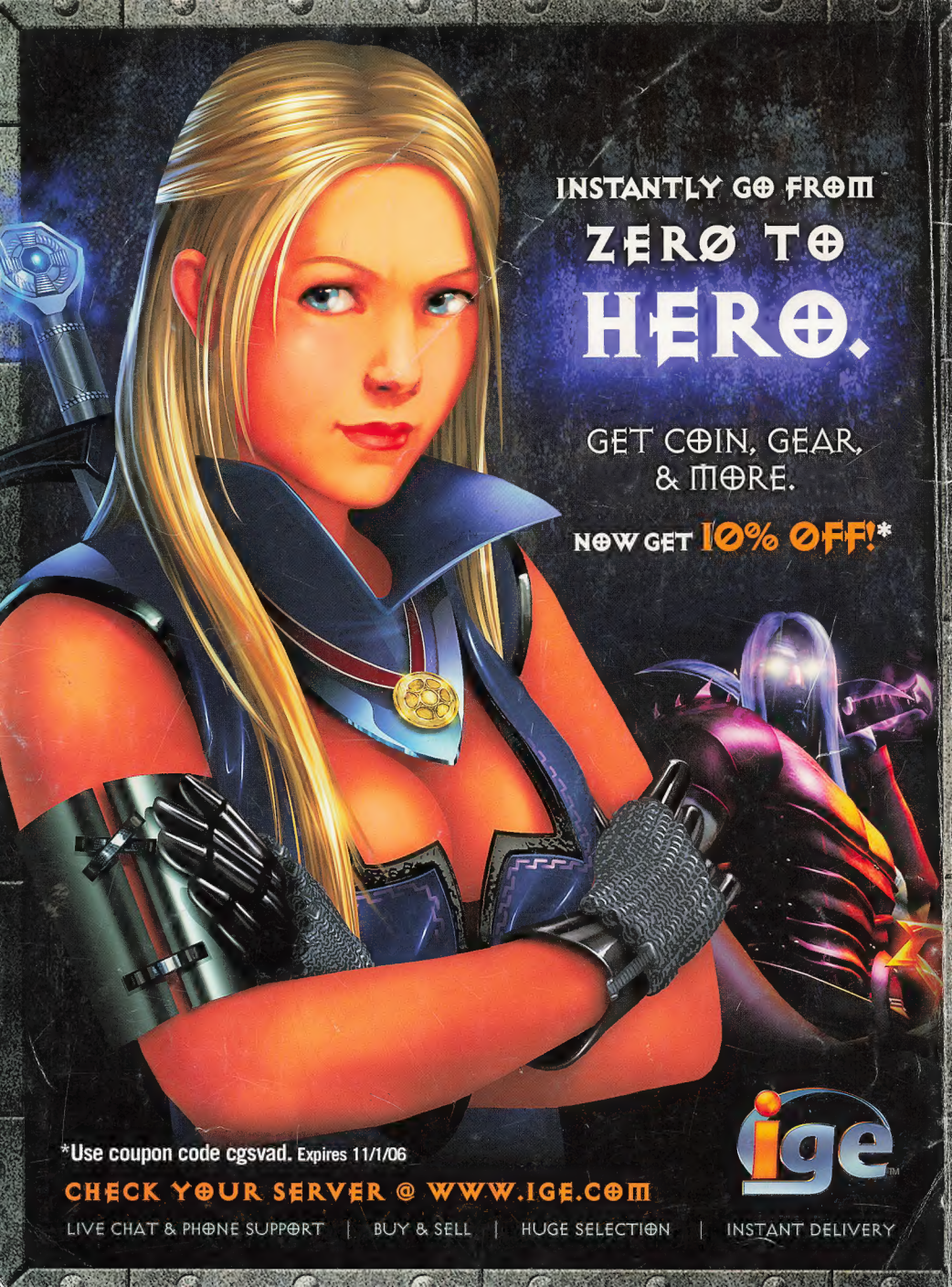
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